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Please print April - 252

MIKE SHAYNE

MYSTERY MAGAZINE

APRIL, 1971
VOL. 28, NO. 5

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

DEATH IS MY PAYOFF

by BRETT HALLIDAY

The girl looked at him, her eyes cold and reptillian. "You can tell me all the answers now, Mike Shayne. All. If you do, you will die fast and easy. If not —" She nodded. "If not, it will take a very long time. You will then be begging for death before it comes."

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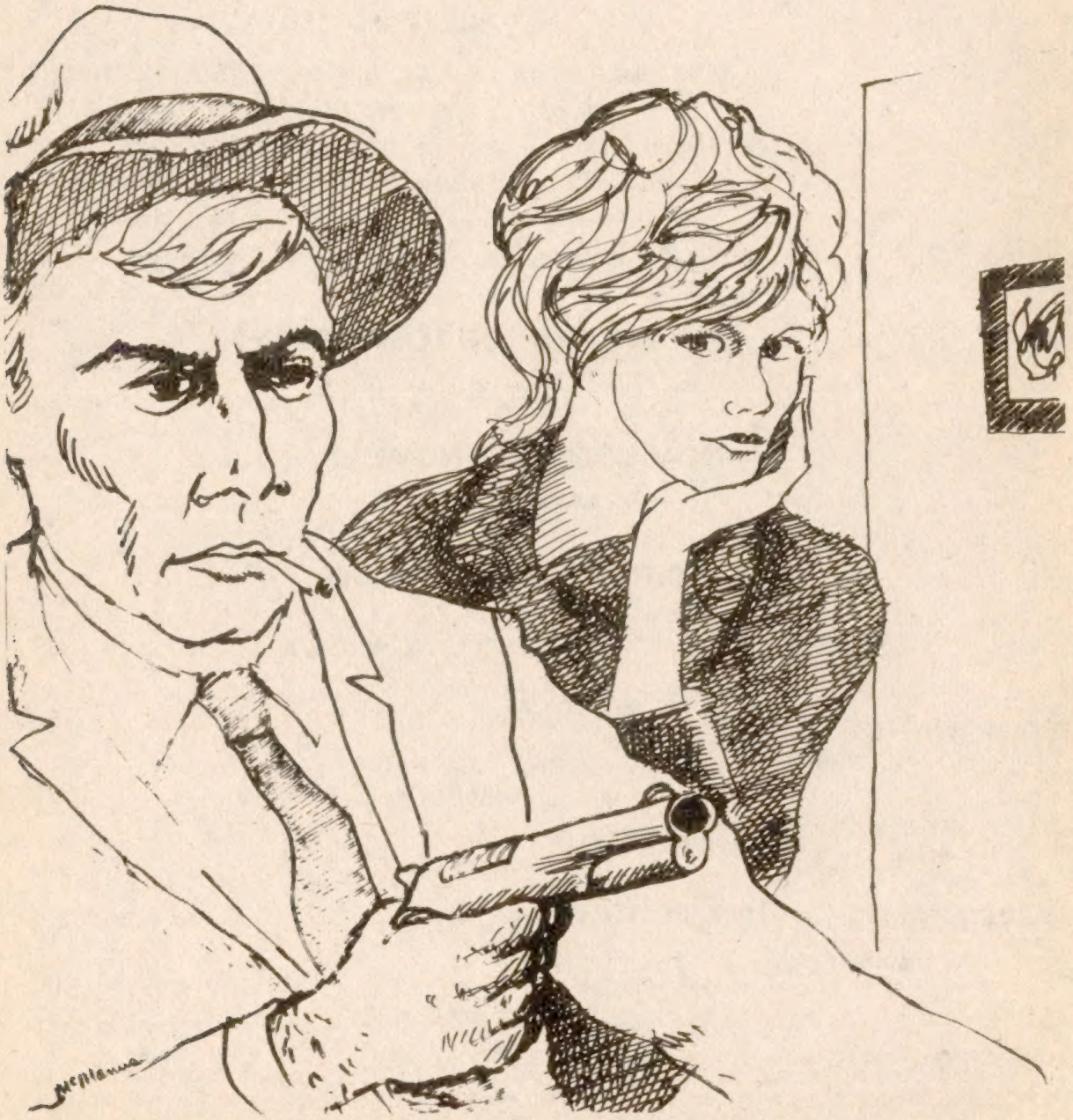
MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE, Vol. 28, No. 5, April, 1971. Published monthly by Renown Publications, Inc. 56 W. 45th St., N. Y., N. Y. 10036. Subscriptions, One Year (12 issues) $6.00; Two Years (24 issues) $12.00; single copies 50c. Second-class postage paid at New York, N. Y. and at additional mailing offices. Places and characters in this magazine are wholly fictitious. © 1971, by Renown Publications, Inc. All rights reserved. Protection secured under the International and Pan-American copyright conventions. Printed in the United States of America. Postmaster--return 3579 to 56 W. 45th Street, New York, New York. 10036.

Death Is

A NEW COMPLETE MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

by BRETT HALLIDAY



My Payoff

"You're a good man, Mike Shayne," the girl said. "Not like this little bum. But—good men die young." Then Shayne saw the gun and he knew what she meant.

THE CON WHO SLEPT in the upper bunk said, "You just gotta understand, Pete."

"Understand what?" the man he called Pete asked, and pulled on his other sock. "This is a fine time for you to want me to start understanding something, Jack."

"I mean," Jack said, "you gotta realize this ain't my idea. It ain't my idea at all. It's just that I gotta be here three more years, and I don't want no shiv in my ribs. This ain't personal, Pete, that's what I mean, Not personal at all. I don't even know who give me this thing. Honest I don't, Pete."

"Okay," Pete said. "I believe you. What you want me to do, kiss your foot to prove it? So just tell me what it is you're blabbering about on this morning of all mornings. Tell me."

"It was in the boiler room," Jack said, "after it got dark in the afternoon. Three of them jumped me. They put a shiv to my neck. Honest to God, I thought I was done. Then they give me something. They said I was to give it to you, today. The day you get out of here."

"Well, then," Pete said, "go on and give it to me." His old face was suddenly lined and tense, but he masked whatever emotion was behind it. "You been carrying it around. I guess it ain't going to bite. So give it here." He held out one gnarled hand.

Jack fumbled inside the pocket of his prison issue shirt. The object he brought out was carefully wrapped in a bit of oily rag from the machine shop. He extended it to the older man.

The one called Pete took the little bundle and unwrapped the cloth. He let Jack watch, because not to have done so would have been a confession of weakness.

Inside the cloth was a little coffin, not more than a couple of inches long, made of thin splints of scrap wood glued together. There was a

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bit of white paper inside the coffin, and somebody had drawn a question mark on the paper with a matchstick dipped in blood.

Jack drew in his breath with an audible sound.

Pete said nothing at all. His hand tightened and crushed the little coffin to splinters. He flushed them down the toilet in one corner of the cell. Then he got up and began to button his shirt.

"I believe you, Jack," he said. "You didn't have nothing to do with that."

II

THE GIRL'S EYES were very blue and her shoulder-length hair was soft and golden and full of waves that couldn't possibly be anything but natural. She was about twenty-two and as full of youth and life as a ripe peach is of juice. She wore an inexpensive blue linen pants suit and low-heeled shoes and an oversized soft white leather shoulder bag.

In the late night shadows of the apartment hotel lobby she stood out as vividly as a rising sun across nearby Biscayne Bay.

"I'm sorry, Mr. Shayne," the night man on the desk said. "I only let her wait because she said she was a friend of yours."

Mike Shayne, private detective, looked at the young woman.

"Please," she said, with an intensity that made her lips tremble. "Please, You're the only one in the world who will do." Above the lips her eyes pled with him.

The desk clerk suppressed a snicker and tried to look totally indifferent.

"She doesn't mean it that way," Shayne said. "Of course she's a friend of mine."

To the girl, "Come on upstairs. You look tired. A drink of hot coffee will do you good."

He took her elbow and led her over to the self-service elevator.

The light in the lobby shone out through wide plate glass windows across the sidewalk and under the waving fronds of the palm trees. Nobody was in sight on the street.

Across the way in the parking lot a little girl in a juvenile pants suit came out from behind one of the parked cars and went quickly to the glass-enclosed pay telephone booth on the corner.

She had to stand on tiptoe to get the handle and pull the booth door shut behind her and then climb up on the small wooden seat to reach the phone itself. There was no hesitation or fumbling about dialing the number though. A man's voice answered.

"I was right," the childish figure said. "She went straight to Mike Shayne."

"Do we kill him now?" the man asked.

"No," the little girl said. "Now we tail him. The killing can wait."

The golden-haired girl was trembling all over when Mike Shayne

got her up to his apartment. He made her sit down while he mixed her a drink of rye and ginger ale at the small bar against one wall. He put a little brandy in a glass for himself.

She took some of the whiskey, and it seemed to steady her a bit.

"Oh, thank you," she said. "It's so good of you. I guess I was afraid I couldn't reach you, that you wouldn't listen to me even if I did."

"I haven't listened to you yet," Mike Shayne said from his own chair, "Not really, that is. Why not go back and start at the beginning and tell me what this's all about? For instance, you know who I am but I don't think I've seen you before. So why not start by telling me who you are?"

"My name is Scarane," the girl said. "Ann Scarane." She looked as if she expected the name to mean something to him.

It didn't.

"But," she said. "But my father said you knew him. You must remember. Scarane? Pietro Scarane? About twelve years ago, when you solved the killer of the lion tamer at the Bauer Brothers Circus. You've got to remember how he helped you out then."

Shayne got up out of his chair.

"Of course," he said. "Of course I remember now. I couldn't forget what happened, but for a minute the name slipped my mind. Old Pete Scarane. I don't think I ever even knew he had a daughter, let alone a real beauty like you. How is old Pete?"

She looked immensely relieved. "He said you'd remember. I don't know quite how to tell you this, Mr. Shayne. My father, he, well, he's been in prison."

"Prison?" Shayne said. "I'm sorry. I didn't know."

He sat down again and finished his brandy.

"He was innocent," the girl said hotly. "They thought he'd taken some money from the show and he couldn't prove different. I know he didn't do it."

"It's all right," Shayne said to cover her confusion. "All that doesn't really matter now, does it? He did me a big favor once. So you just tell me what the trouble is now."

Ann Scarane finished her own drink. Then she smiled at Mike Shayne. It was a shy and grateful smile.

She said, "Oh, God bless you, Mr. Shayne. I was so afraid that — but he said you would help. I'll try to pull myself together now."

"That would be a good idea," Shayne said.

He got up and took her glass and mixed her another drink. When he offered it to her she leaned forward in the chair and the big shoulder strap bag slid off her lap. It hit the carpeted floor with a heavy thud. He leaned over and picked it up and returned it to her.

"Go ahead, now," he said. "Tell me what the trouble is."

"I'm not sure I can," she said. "That is, I'm not sure I understand myself. Dad was supposed to get out of prison this morning. Instead they told me at the gate he was ill. They let me see him in the infirmary. We couldn't talk very well. There were people around. He did tell me his illness was nothing. He faked a fit. He learned to do that in the circus. He said his life was in danger. I was to hire you to meet him when he gets out tomorrow morning."

Shayne looked at his watch.

"This morning," he said.

"Oh, yes. I guess it is. He said he wanted you to guard him for a few days till he could get away from the people who threatened him."

She saw the hesitation in Shayne's face. "I can pay you, Mr. Shayne. I've been working at a good job. I have money saved for when Dad was released."

"It isn't that," Shayne said. "It's just that this isn't usually the kind of case I take. I'm not a hired gun, you know, and that's what being a bodyguard boils down to. Besides, I'd need to know who is threatening him and why. Right now I don't really know what I'm getting into."

"Is that more important," she said with a flare of spirit," than the life of an old man who once saved yours? Is it?"

Mike Shayne said rather stiffly, "Of course, if you put it that way." He sat back in his chair and one big hand went up to tug at the lobe of his left ear — a sure sign of thought and indecision. Outside the window the ever-burning lights of Miami sparkled on the jet surface of the river.

"Oh," she said. "There, I've gone and done it again. Put my foot in my mouth. I didn't mean to sound that way. It's just that Dad seemed so sure you'd be willing to help. His life is in danger. He's convinced of it, and I believe him. He didn't tell me why. Really, there wasn't time or chance in that ward with the convict orderlies hanging around trying to overhear. Does it make any difference? He has to leave prison in the morning. Can't you at least come and help me get him to a safe place? After that, if you aren't satisfied, it will be up to you what to do."

Shayne thought for a moment before announcing his decision. "I guess I can do that. If somebody really is after old Pete they'll know he gets out and he'll be a sitting duck for a while."

"Thank you," she said. There was the ring of real sincerity in her voice.

"Then that's settled," Shayne said. "We'll have to get started right now if we're going to meet him on the prison house steps."

"We can fly up," she said. "I left a car at the airport when I took the plane down here this afternoon." When she stood up her head came just to the big man's shoulder.

Shayne looked down at the softly curled golden hair. His trained detective mind wondered a little how she'd spent the afternoon hours be-

fore contacting him. Then he dismissed the thought. He and Lucy Hamilton, his girl Friday, and Tim Rourke of the *News* had spent the afternoon together at the beach and driven up to Hollywood for dinner. For all he knew the girl might have tried a dozen times to call him.

He took the time to put a few necessities in an overnight bag, including a spare gun and shells and a pair of handcuffs borrowed from his friend, Miami Police Chief Will Gentry, and to phone Lucy Hamilton. From her sleepy voice he'd got her out of bed, but she took down the few details he could give her.

Shayne got his own car out of the hotel parking lot. "I can leave this at the airport," he told Ann Scarane.

When they reached the street there was only one car movinng a long way off, but Shayne looked up and down the street from habit.

"That's funny," he said.

"What?" Ann asked.

"I thought I saw a little girl run into a doorway down the way," he said. "It's too late for a child to be about."

Ann Scarane drew in her breath with a gasp and he could feel her body stiffen on the car seat beside him.

"What's the matter?" the redhead asked.

"A child?" she said. "That scares me, Mr. Shayne. What if that wasn't a child at all?"

Then Mike Shayne remembered. His old friend Pietro Scarane had

been a clown in the circus. He'd been a very good clown — one of the best.

Part of the reason he'd been so good was that Pietro Scarane had been a midget.

III

THERE WAS NOTHING spectacular about old Pete Scarane's return to the life of a free man.

The usual bored guard unlocked the small door that flanked the big main gates of the prison and swung it open briefly. The little

man, drawn up to the full stretch of his chunky three feet six inches of height, walked through carrying his hat in one hand and the canvas flight bag that held his few personal possessions in the other.

Ann stooped and kissed the old man on his balding forehead. Mike Shayne shook hands briefly. "Let's go," he said. "First stop is the hotel room Ann rented in town. I want to get you off the street, Pete."

"A room in town," Scarane said. "Isn't that too easy for them to find?"

"If somebody's really after you," Shayne said, "you know as well as I do we're being watched right this minute. Every road we could try to run by will be covered. I've got to have a quiet talk with you before deciding what to do, and a hotel room in broad daylight is as safe a place as any I can think of. Or did you hire me to take orders instead of guard you?"

"I wanted you because I'm afraid," the midget said. "I got to remember you're the pro. Let's go to your hotel."

Once in the comfortable, clean hotel room with a bottle and glasses and the first really good breakfast old Pete Scarane had eaten in years on the table, all three of them were able to relax.

The midget ate like three hungry big men.

"That food!" Scarane said. "Anything else I could get used to, but not that damn lousy slop they fed. I tell you, Mike, not one really good meal in a whole year. Not even the Christmas dinner they brag about in the papers. I must force myself to eat. It is no fun."

"That's all fine," Shayne said, "but I'm supposed to do a job. Wipe off your chin and tell me what this is all about."

"What it's about," Scarane said, "is that I'm likely to be killed for something I never did. It's a long story, so I'll cut it as short as I can. I don't guess you knew about my going to prison. It didn't happen in the Miami area, and it wasn't about a murder, so I guess the papers wouldn't have given it much of a play."

"They didn't," Shayne said. "At least I didn't know anything about it till Ann told me last night. What were you convicted of?"

"Of being a damn fool mostly, Mike," the little man said. "In its last year the circus had new owners. Wrong guys, Mafiosi. They bought it to use as a cover for a traveling gambling setup. You know — bring some real fast action to the well-heeled people in the country circuits. In big towns too. I guess it made money. Too much money." He stopped and poured himself a drink from the bottle on the table.

"Go on, Dad," Ann said.

"Somebody must have thought there was too much money, because there was a hit. It was when we were playing Jacksonville and had our tents in fields outside of town.

Whoever it was set fire to the menagerie tents as a cover. It was pretty awful for a while.

"Of course, the new owners had gunsels. Security guards they called them. There was a fight and shooting. Nobody got killed but it was real hairy. One of the bosses was wounded. I found him trying to get to his car with the cash box from the gambling tent. He was hit in the legs and down. I couldn't carry him, so he gave me the box and told me to take it to his partners. I left him there."

"You got any witnesses?" Shayne asked.

"In that sort of a 'hey Rube' with guns and fire? Are you crazy? Nobody cared about nothing but himself that night."

"Dad's telling the truth," Ann said.

"I wouldn't lie to you, Mike. Anyway, I left him and run off. The police found him and put him in the ambulance. In the hospital he died of a heart attack."

"What's in that to put you in prison?"

"Just wait and I'll tell you. I never got that box to the other owners. I was a sucker to try, but I did try. Somebody must have seen him give it to me. Over near the office trailer I got sapped. Whoever it was must have tried to kill me. If I hadn't such a hard head" — he rubbed his skull with one horny hand — "I'd of been dead. When I came to the money was gone, the big tent was burning; animals running loose; the rubes all stampeded to get out of there. It was pure hell."

"So you ran for it," Shayne said. "That wasn't real bright of you, but most people would've done the same."

"I ran," Pietro Scarane said. "I thought about what them other hoods would say if I tried to tell them the money was gone, and all I could think about was run. Only three days I managed to hide out. How does a midget like me lose himself in a crowd, Mike?"

"It's a good question," Shayne said. "I got to solve it for you all over."

"The cops got me. The hood who died said I was carrying circus money. I guess at that I'm lucky the law found me before his partners did. Nobody would believe I hadn't stashed the dough some time the three days I was running. The jury didn't believe me. I got sent to The Place."

He stopped and finished his drink and sat there looking at Mike Shayne.

The big detective threw back his head and laughed out loud. Both of them looked at him in surprise. He got to his feet and reached for the battered felt hat he'd tossed on top of the bureau when he came in.

"It's been fun, folks," Shayne said. "It's been lots of fun, but here's where I get off."

"Mr. Shayne," the girl said, "whatever — "

"Oh, shut up, girl," old Pete said. "I'm sorry, Mike. I should have known."

"You should have known two things," Shayne told him with an edge of anger in his tone. "Never forget them when you're dealing with a pro. I'm a pro. The second thing was don't lie to your own side. I'm supposed to be working for you. Unless I know the truth and the whole truth, how can I do a job? If I have to choke down fairy tales from you, we're both dead. So I'm declaring myself out of this mess right now."

Old Pete shook his head sadly. "I thought it was a perfectly good story. Now you turn around and call me a liar, and in front of an innocent girl. In front of my very own daughter."

"You say your bosses were Mafiosi,' Shayne said, "and they want you dead for double-crossing them about money- Pete, if those people wanted you killed, it would have been done in prison. An ice pick through your ribs or your throat cut in the vard. It's been done before.

"If they just wanted you tortured to tell where you hid the money, that could be arranged back of the walls too. Or they'd just have snatched your girl here and sent word to you they had her and you could buy her back. If it was Mafia, they'd never have let me take you off the prison steps. They'd have had their own people meet you.

"Your story's full of holes, Pete. Where did you hide for three days without money? Where have you got to go now? What other hoods had the nerve to try to knock over a Mafiosi set-up, anyhow? No, Pete, I don't buy any of that story. I want out of this whole thing while I can."

He stood by the window, looking out and down at the street for a moment. Then he clapped his old hat onto his head.

The rifle bullet came in through the window and snatched the hat off his head. The bullet left a neat round hole in the expensive copper screening of the window.

All three of them hit the carpeted floor of the room with one concerted lunge. Mike Shayne had his big forty-five automatic in his hand before he got to the floor.

There were no more bullets. Outside the window the small town street droned with its usual afternoon business.

Shayne got up very carefully and pulled the blinds across the window. He closed the glass and turned on the room air conditioner.

"You can't get out now," Pete Scarane said then. "You waited too long, Mike."

Nobody else said anything.

"You waited too long," Scarane said again. "That shot wasn't fired by somebody mistook you for me." He chuckled. "Even through a window screen that ain't possible, Mike. You gonna be killed yourself unless you help me out."

"You're an old devil," Shayne said. "How do I know I won't be

killed anyway if I do help you?"

"You don't. But at least I can help you give them a run for their money. You'll be in there pitching, boy, and I think maybe you and I can be too tough for all of them."

Shayne still said nothing.

Old Pete eyed him. "You ain't trying to convince yourself that was maybe just a warning shot, are you? That if you quit now, they might let you go."

"No," Shayne said. "That was no warning shot. Nobody's that good with a rifle to shoot a man's hat off on purpose. Even a real sniper couldn't do it shooting through a screen that would deflect the bullet. Whoever he was was trying to kill me, all right."

"Sure he was," the old midget said. "They don't know how much I've told you. They don't let you go free, because you might know all of it. So they think you got to be killed."

"They don't know they're wasting their bullets," Mike Shayne said, "because all you've told me so far is a pack of damn lies. That's the truth, isn't it, Pete?"

"Suppose maybe I did sorta skip over one or two little things?"

"You better bring them up to date, then," Shayne said, "or I'm pulling out right now. Maybe I can stay alive by myself or maybe not, but I'll bet my last dollar you can't, old man. So either tell me what's really up or I go now. I mean it."

"He means it," the girl said.

The old midget said, "Okay, Mike. Keep your shirt on. It's money they want. Money they think only I can lead them to. That's why they didn't snatch Ann. They know I got to be there myself to get the money. Even if somebody else knew where it was, he couldn't get it. A safe deposit box. I got to be there in person to make my thumb print or the bank lets nobody in."

"The money from the circus?"

"Yeah. I didn't exactly get robbed of it. I got clear off the lot and stashed it in a box before the cops got to me. In a bank."

"Who's after you, Pete?"

"I told you that. Mafia."

"You're lying again, and it makes me want to be sick to my stomach. When you were tried any bank in its right mind would remember a mid-

get renting a box and tell somebody. On top of that it's not Mafiosi on your tail. There was another midget watching my apartment hotel last night. Now try to tell me the truth about at least one thing. How much money?"

"Forty thousand dollars, Mike. You get ten thousand for yourself if you get me to it alive. I swear it."

"Stop swearing," Shayne said. "You're wasting your time. Suppose I do decide to go along with this cockamamie yarn of yours. What then? You expect me to risk my own neck for a lousy twenty-five percent?"

"Ten grand is a lot of money, Mike."

"Not to me it isn't. Not when it's already hot money and I risk my license by even touching it — as well as my neck."

"How much do you want?" the midget asked wearily.

Shayne poked his finger through the bullet hole in his old felt hat. It stuck up nakedly and he waggled it to and fro. "I want half. That is if I get you to your money. I want half of everything we find there. Mind you, I don't swallow your word that it's only forty grand. Whatever it is — half."

The girl looked at him with china-blue eyes in that innocent face and ripped out a hundred words of obscenity that made his skin crawl.

"I won't do it," Pietro Scarane said.

"You'll do it," his daughter told him. "This big redheaded bastard has us over a barrel, and he knows it. That wasn't a mosquito made the hole in the screen over there. Okay, fifty-fifty is the split. You satisfied now?"

"Not quite," Shayne said.

They looked at him with hate and something close to fear in their eyes.

"On top of the fifty-fifty split," Shayne said, "there's one more little detail. I got to have a new hat."

He roared with laughter at the expressions on their faces. Then — amazingly — the girl put back her head and laughed with him.

"If I'm not too busy hating you, big man," she said, "I could maybe even go for you."

"All right, then. Where do we go to get this stuff?"

"Miami first," old Pete said. "It ain't far from there."

IV

THEY WENT DOWN the rear stairway of the hotel and left Ann's car parked in the hotel lot for any watcher to see.

"As long as your car isn't moved, they may think we're still upstairs," Mike Shayne said.

"What do we do, walk to Miami?" the midget asked.

"Shut up," his daughter told him. "Doing time must have scrambled your brains. Big Red here will think of something."

"I already have," Shayne said. "I used the phone from the airport

when we came in. There's a rented car waiting just a couple of blocks from here. You can come back and pick up yours later — that is, if you even want to with all that money in your hands."

The car Shayne had rented was a late model maroon sedan. He locked his bag and old Pete's flight bag in the trunk. Ann had left all her clothing in her own car.

"Never you care," her father said. "You can buy a whole dress store when we get the money."

"Either that," Shayne said, "or the county will give you a sheet — no charge."

"You talk like that," she said, "and maybe I won't like you any more."

Shayne looked at her and grinned.

"I guess I gotta risk it," he said.

They drove out of town and headed south toward Miami and the Gold Coast.

"We're in no hurry," Shayne told the others. "I figure we'll stop for the night some place between Fort Pierce and Palm Beach. It's too late to get into Miami before dark anyway."

"Won't they follow us?" Pete Scarane asked. "I mean, is it safe to stop any place?"

"I think so," Shayne told him. "They probably know we're headed for Miami. That being so, they'll figure to pick us up at the other end. There's only a few ways to get into town, and they'll find out which one I'm likely to use and wait ahead of us. There's no point in closing in on you first."

"You mean because I gotta be there to get the money?"

"Exactly. That's about the only part of your yarn I do believe. Unless they needed you to get the stuff, you'd be dead long before this. You're alive just so you can lead them to it. Up until then they'll follow, but they won't close in for the kill."

"So what do we do, genius?" Ann asked. "Do we just lead where they want to go? I think that would be just plain suicide, and I want to go on living."

"So do I," the big detective said. "Don't worry. There's one thing going our way that I don't believe they realize. Miami's my town. I know it inside and out. If I can't shake any tail there for long enough to pick up what we're after, I'll eat what's left of my hat. A good man's always better than good on his own home ground."

"That's okay with me," the little man said.

Scarane climbed over the top of the front seat into the back of the car. Then he stretched out full length on the back seat, pillowed his head on one arm, and went to sleep.

Shayne drove without speaking for several miles. He wanted to be sure old Pete actually was asleep before trying to talk to the girl.

They were on a secondary road winding south through a maze of low hills, sparkling blue lakes, orange

groves and sleepy little towns. Traffic was light, and Shayne was sure he would be able to spot any car actually following him. There wasn't any.

The girl put her blonde head on his shoulder and snuggled against him. Shayne found the contact rather pleasant.

The position brought her mouth close to his right ear. After about ten minutes she spoke in a very low voice.

"Don't answer me," she said. "Don't make out like you hear. I think he's asleep, but you never know."

She reached over and took Shayne's right hand and put it on her knee. "You can drive this road with one hand. If you mean yes to what I say squeeze once, if no twice. Get me?"

Shayne pressed her knee once. He moved his hand a little.

"Not now," she said. "Later. He might wake up. You really don't believe what he told you, do you?"

Shayne squeezed twice.

"Okay. I don't either. I don't know it all, but I'll tell you what I can. All of it. I won't hold out on you, Mike."

He pressed her knee once.

"I don't dare talk now. If he knew I was helping you, God knows what he might try to do to me."

Alter a long moment of silence, "I'm on your side of this, big boy. If I help you, you'll look after me, won't you?"

The detective gave the signal for yes.

"Okay. Okay, honey." Her voice was warmer and more confident now. "Tonight you come to my room after he's corked off. Let him have a bottle and he'll sleep real hard. It knocks him out. Then we can talk, and I'll tell you all I know. I promise I will, Mike." Ann turned to look at her father.

Then a big trailer truck came up from behind and passed with a roar and a rush of wind that waked old Pete on the back seat. The old man sat up and blinked out the car windows.

His body was still child's size except for an adult thickening around the waist and callousing of the hands. The back of his neck was red and wrinkled by time and sun. His face wasn't childlike at all. It was the face of an old man, of an old man who had known weariness and dissipation, hard work and loneliness and come to live with greed and cynicism and some great and crowning disillusion. It wasn't a handsome face, or even a likable one.

"I know I'm crazy," Shayne told himself mentally. "I've got to be crazy to be running with a pair like this. It'll be bull luck if I get out of this with a whole skin."

He didn't dare let them open the bag because his gun and money were there, so he pulled over to the side of the road and went back and unlocked the trunk himself. He got a

bottle of rye whiskey out of the bag and then locked the trunk again.

Back in the car he unscrewed the metal bottle cap and took a swallow of the whiskey. He passed the bottle to the girl. She put her head back and drank out of the neck like a man. It was a good stiff drink.

Then she passed the bottle back to the old man. His eyes lit up when he fondled the cool glass of the bottle between his two small palms.

"Thanks, Mike," he said. "This'll be a big help."

Shayne started the motor and pulled back onto the road. About seven o'clock that evening he pulled into a combined motel and restaurant on a side road between Fort Pierce and the expressway. They signed for two cabins, one for Ann and the other for Scarane and Shayne to share.

"Like I said," the detective told them, "I don't expect anybody to bushwhack us until you actually get to whatever it is that you're after. There wouldn't be any point in killing you just for revenge while there's still a chance of getting the money. Still, we'd better be careful. I'll get some food and carry it to the cabin."

"Get another bottle while you're at it," old Pete said. "What's left in this won't last three of us very long."

"When I'm working it'll last me a week,' Shayne said. Nevertheless, he got a couple of fifths of rye at the package store adjoining the restaurant.

They ate dinner and drank and turned on the television. The reception was poor and the program indifferent, but nobody seemed to be in a talkative mood.

Pete Scarane drank more than the other two combined. It amazed Shayne that so small a body could take that much of the raw liquor. After a while it began to tell. By ten o'clock the old man was comfortably passed out, fully clothed, on his bed in the cabin.

The girl looked at Shayne.

"Come on," she said. "We can talk in my cabin now. He'll never notice we're gone."

The big man hesitated.

"He'll be okay," she said. "Nobody followed us here or you'd have spotted them. Besides, we'll be right next door, and you can lock this place up tight while you're gone."

Shayne thought it over and decided she was probably right. He closed and locked the cabin. When they went out she carried the second fifth of rye with her. He didn't try to stop her.

Inside her cabin she sat down on the bed and poured herself a drink. He waved aside her offer of the second tumbler from the washstand medicine cabinet. She didn't bother to turn on the cabin lights. Enough came in from the office and parking area lights so they could see what they were doing.

"Okay. Talk," Shayne said.

"You don't have to be in such a damn hurry. Here we are alone to-

gether, all nice and cozy like. Come on, have a drink."

"Later."

"No later. Now. You want me to like you, you got to be nice to me."

Shayne took the bottle and made as if to drink from the open neck. He swallowed a couple of times, but managed to take only a small amount of the rye.

"Now," he said, "suppose you tell me what this is all about. You and the old man have done nothing at all but lie and play games with me since this caper started. Meanwhile, somebody else tries to shoot my head off. Either I get the truth right now or I've had it. You know what that means, lady? Had it?"

"All right," she said. "You don't have to get so snuffy about it. I don't know why Pete figured he had to lie to you in the first place. If you're smart enough to help us, it means you're too smart to be sold a snow job. I tried to tell him."

She made to pour herself another drink, but Shayne put out one big hand and took the bottle away from her.

"You've had enough for now," he said. "I know Pete has somebody's money stashed away. I also know it isn't the Mafia's. Tell me."

"It belongs to the Interational," she said. "The International Council of the Little People. It's the retirement city stake and there's over three hundred and fifty thousand dollars in all. Nobody can pick it up but him."

"Tell me more," Shayne said.

"The midgets — the little people and dwarfs — for years and years they've wanted a city of their own where they could retire when they got old. A place where they could go when the road shows closed for the winter — have their kids; live without being gawked at and laughed at all the time. I don't suppose you'd know what that means to people."

"I'm human," Shayne said.

"It was the council bought the gambling concession at the circus. Their men ran it — not Mafiosi. Of course, they had a dummy to front for them and run things. They had to pay off everybody in sight, too. Still, they had a gold mine. That was the trouble. The real Mafia got greedy. They wanted it all instead of just a cut.

"The council got desperate. They figured to stage the robbery and fire to cover. Theyd cut out with the big pot they already had stashed away, and blame it on hijackers."

"I can see now," Shayne said. "Everything went fine until old Pete got greedy."

"Exactly. He was supposed to deliver the cash to the council that night. Instead he cut and ran for it. He was on the loose three days, and in that time he hid it out some place. To get it back he has to have a key. Nobody but himself in person can pick up that key. Anyway, he's sold them on that. Otherwise he'd have been killed in prison, like you said."

"If that's so why did they let him be jailed to begin with?"

"Yeah," she said bitterly. "Why waste eight years? All I can say is nobody's perfect. When they couldn't find him, they had their front man swear out a warrant that he'd stolen circus money so the cops would find him for them. That worked fine, except he got convicted, and then they found out they had to have him to get the money."

"Couldn't they backtrack him in all this time and find out where he hid out the swag? Seems to me a midget would have left a trail anybody could follow."

"He did," she said. "Sure he did. He was smart enough to know he would. We know who has the key. At least, they found that out fast enough."

"Who?"

"Big Al Garcia." She paused and reached for the bottle again. Shayne still held it out of her reach. "Now you know why they had to wait until he got out to try for the key."

"Now I know," Mike Shayne said.

Al Garcia was big and tough. He'd begun as a pawnbroker years ago and graduated to loan shark and then head of a string of loan offices. Some were legal and some weren't. He had mortgage companies and liquor stores and gambling houses. The corporate setups were so tangled that probably even his own lawyers couldn't keep track, but it all added up to wealth and great

power. He was too big for anybody to get rough with.

He was also, in his own fashion, a man of honor. That is, a man of his word. If he'd promised Pete Scarane not to give a key to anybody else, Big Al would keep that promise.

For the Council of Little People, or anybody else, that was check and checkmate. Until Pete Scarane himself got the key it was as far out of their reach as if he'd managed to hide it inside one of the craters on the moon. Shayne didn't have any trouble understanding that.

"One thing I don't get," he said. "You are old Pete's daughter, aren't you?"

"Yeah," she said. "Like it or leave it, there's nothing I can do to change that."

"Then," he asked, "why can't they make it easy on themselves by snatching you? Why didn't they do that a couple of days ago? They

could offer to sell you back to Pete for the money."

She laughed. It wasn't a nice laugh to hear. Tough as Mike Shayne was, and hardened by his years as a private detective, it made his skin crawl.

"I don't know why they didn't," she said, "but I can see you don't know much about your client. Good old Pietro Scarane, the jolly little clown who makes all the kiddies laugh. If he had to choose between his own flesh and blood and three hundred and fifty grand in legal tender, just what do you think his answer would be? He'd laugh in their faces, Mike Shayne. That's just exactly what he'd do."

There was a long moment of silence. She got up and leaned over and kissed Shayne full on the mouth, and it wasn't a childish kiss. He stood up. She pressed her body against his and kissed him again.

"I'm lonely, Mike," she said. "Don't let me go on being lonely."

After a moment he pushed her away gently. They sat down again side by side on the bed. This time he let her pour herself another drink from the bottle.

"You've got a reason for telling me all this?" he asked then. "You better have, because what you just told me puts me on a spot."

"I knew it would," she said. "I'm smarter than you think I am, Mike Shayne. There's one big reason why I said okay to hiring you for this job. Everybody in Miami — that is, everybody who counts — says the same thing about Mike Shayne. They say you're an honest cop."

"That's nice of them," Shayne said. "That surely is, but you see where it puts me now, don't you? If I'm all that honest, and if — mind you, I say if — all you just told me is true, where does an honest man come in trying to help old Pete steal a third of a million bucks from the rest of the midgets? Suppose you answer me that one?"

V

ANN SCARANE said, "I can do better than that. If you let me make just one call over the phone in this cabin, somebody'll be here in fifteen minutes who can answer any question you've got."

"Answer questions or put a hole in my head instead of my hat this time?" Shayne said. "What you're talking about is calling in the people who are after Pete, isn't it?"

She took a handkerchief out of the pocket of her dress and waved it at him. "See that? It's the white flag. The flag of truce. That's all they want, a chance to talk things over. They didn't try to tail you too close today or close in. It was up to me to set up a talk-talk. You've got my word nobody'll try to harm you or Pete if you agree."

"I've got a hole in my hat," Shayne said.

"I don't know about that. I think somebody meant it as a warning

and came too close. You said yourself it's impossible to be accurate on a shot like that. Anyway I mean what I say now, Mike. Let me prove it. What have you got to lose?"

"Okay," Shayne said at last. "Call your friends in. I'll talk. But that's all I can say so far.

Ann Scarane had to fish into her bag for a slip of paper with a phone number on it. She got the motel switchboard to put the call through for her. From the call letters Shayne decided it was a Fort Pierce exchange.

The girl spoke briefly in a low tone and some of the words in a language that might have been Spanish or Italian. Then she put the phone back in its cradle.

"They'll be here in about twenty minutes."

"We'll move to the other cabin," Shayne said. "I want Pete where I can see he's safe while they're here. What do we do, by the way, if he wakes up while we're talking?"

This time she laughed with real amusement. "He won't wake up. I put a couple of sleeping pills in with the booze he drank. He's on ice until about seven in the morning."

After a while a closed sedan drove up to the motel and two small figures got out. Ann met them in front of the cabin and brought them in to Shayne. There was a light on and she mixed drinks all around. Shayne remembered the sleeping pills and left his glass sit untouched.

The two visitors were a man and a woman. The man was a dwarf, with heavy body and normal-sized head, but stunted legs and short, child-sized arms. His expression was determined rather than evil. It was the face of a man Mike Shayne would have liked to know under different circumstances. He could have been anywhere between fifty and sixty years old.

The woman was probably in her early fifties. She was a true midget like old Pete; that is to say, her body was in perfect proportion except on a far more diminutive scale than the normal. Even with high heels on, the crown of her head wouldn't reach quite four feet from the floor. She had soft, wavy brown hair and capable, alert grey eyes, and a rare sort of doll-like beauty.

Shayne couldn't tell which of the two was the dominant one.

"This is Earline Taggert," Ann Scarane said, introducing the woman, "and Dan Miller. They speak for the Council of the Little People of the World."

"That is correct, Mr. Shayne," the dwarf said. "I believe Ann has described to you the difficult situation in which we all find ourselves at the present."

"She's tried," Shayne said. "I think I'm at least beginning to get the picture. Suppose you tell me whatever it is you came to say."

"We are going to try," the woman put in. "We do appreciate your willingness to hear us out. I may add that we trust in your own intelli-

gence to plead our case more strongly than we could do for ourselves. I've always been a believer in the power of right and justice, even in this lousy world."

"I'm a private detective," Shayne said, and pulled at the lobe of his ear. "I'm not a judge. I gather you feel my client" — he flicked a thumb at the prostrate and snoring Scarane — "is holding out a fortune that rightfully belongs to you."

They both spoke at once.

"Not to us," the woman said. "Not to us, but to the hundreds of our kind whom we represent."

The dwarf had taken a different line. "In time, Mr. Shayne, our lawyers can and will demonstrate in court to whom the money belongs. If Pietro Scarane wants to challenge us, we'll go to court. We haven't any fear for the outcome. The money belongs to a corporation legally constituted and owned by its stockholders."

"I'm inclined to believe you," the detective said. "But even if you are telling the truth, where am I? I was hired to protect this old man's life. If I turn him over to you and he gets killed, I've betrayed a client. I've never done that in my life. If I don't, I'm in the position of helping a thief get away with his booty. Why shouldn't I just turn this man over to Chief Will Gentry when we get to Miami and let the courts settle things like you say they will? Oh, don't tell me. I know. Because Pete still won't let you have the money. He'll still have it hid out."

"Of course," Earline Taggert said. "That isn't what you want. We want you to let him get the money, and then turn it and him over to us. It's the fair thing. Even Ann knows that, and she's his own daughter. Believe us, we don't intend to kill him. Why should we risk trial for murder, when we can escrow the money until the courts award it to us?"

"Of course we don't want anybody killed," the dwarf said emphatically.

Dan Miller got to his feet and drew himself up so that his head and shoulders were between the light and the drawn blinds of the motel cabin window.

"All of you keep saying that," Mike Shayne said. The big man picked up his felt hat and stuck his finger through the bullet hole in the crown. "You say no killing, but one of you fired the bullet that made that hole. Somebody tried to kill me earlier today. So what do I believe?"

The two little people watched his finger protrude through the felt. The dwarf looked shocked. Shayne could have sworn that the expression mirrored a genuine emotion.

"As God is my witness," Earline said in a shocked tone, "that bullet was none of our doing. We had no one fire at you, Mr. Shayne. I swear it on all that is sacred to me. I swear — "

She had no time to finish the sentence. For the second time that day

a rifle bullet came through the window of a room where Shayne was.

This one had to smash the glass of the closed opaque jalousies and the thin cloth of the drapes. In spite of that it struck the standing dwarf just under and behind the right ear and angled upwards into the brain. Dan Miller died instantly.

Mike Shayne was seated, but he swiveled in the chair and kicked the lamp's electric plug out of the wall to plunge the room into darkness. He sensed Ann Scarane diving for the floor. One of his big hands grabbed the woman, Earline, and pulled her out of the chair in which she was sitting. He heard her startled gasp, but she didn't try to resist.

Old Pete Scarane went on snoring on the bed.

"I've got a gun, Mike," Ann Scarane said.

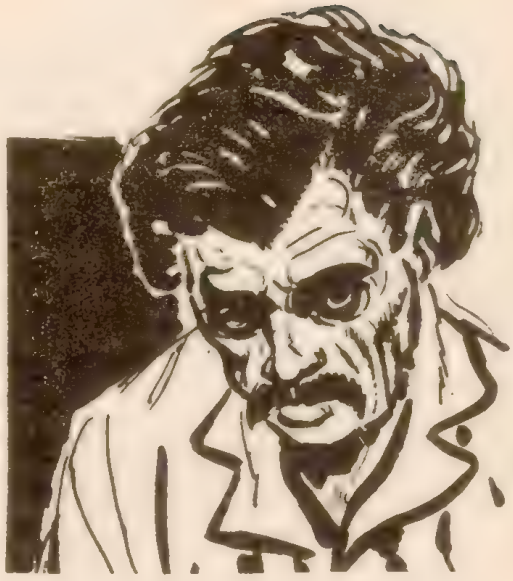
"I know you have. I felt it when I picked up your bag last night. Watch the back of this place and shoot anybody who tries to come through the door or window."

"The shot came from the front. Let's run for it out the back," Ann said.

"You let me worry about front and back," Shayne told her. "Just you do like I say. Mrs. Taggert, are you armed?"

"No," Earline said. "Of course not. We came in good faith for a talk. How is Dan Miller?"

"He's dead," Shayne said. "Somebody else came in bad faith with a gun."



"Poor Dan," she said. Then a rapid whisper of prayer. Shayne began to admire the delicate little woman's courage.

"Mike," Ann said. "Mike. We'll all be dead if we don't make a break for it. Let's try the back while we can — while we have a chance."

"I'll decide if we have a chance and what we'll do," Shayne said. "Stay away from both those doors."

As in most motels of its vintage the "cabins" were not detached, but merely divided by common side walls. Doors through these walls enabled two or more units to be thrown together as a suite to accommodate large parties of guests. Shayne's ring of skeleton keys and lock picks enabled him to open the connecting door to Ann's cabin in a matter of minutes.

He thought the unit on the far side of Ann's had not been rented. When

he got that lock open too, he found the unit empty.

He stepped back to get the others.

There had been no second shot from outside.

"Wrap the old man in a sheet," he told Ann. "You're going to carry him on your shoulder like he was a sleeping child. And put that gun back in your bag. If there's going to be any shooting from our side, I'll do it."

"I can shoot," she said. "I can handle a gun." Nevertheless, she did as he said.

"If you don't mind, Mrs. Taggert," Shayne said. He pulled another sheet off the other bed.

"Of course I don't mind. I'm not a fool." She took the sheet and wrapped it around herself and around Shayne's small emergency overnight bag. Then she sat in the crook of his left arm and took hold of his shoulder to ease the drag of her weight.

"I only wish we could do something for poor Dan. He was such a good friend for so long."

"What he'd want most right now is for you to get safely away from here," Shayne said. "For the rest of it, only God can help him now."

"Let's go," Ann said. "My old man may look like a kid in this sheet, but he sure weighs a lot more than one."

"We're a married couple carrying our kids up to the restaurant," Shayne said. "We walk slow and easy until we get to the parking lot. Then we get in the car and drive off. If there's any trouble, you two run for the car or cover, whichever is the closest. Meet me at the bus station in Fort Pierce."

They walked out the door of the unit and walked down the line past the bullet-shattered window. Nobody bothered them. A juke box was blaring in the restaurant, which was probably why the shot hadn't attracted attention. Shayne could see that Ann was white-faced, but she walked steadily and resisted any temptation to peer out into the darkness.

They passed the brightly lit front of the restaurant and got into the parking lot. Shayne checked his rented car, but saw no sign that it had been tampered with. He put Ann and Pete in the back seat and took Earline up front. None of them said a word. He turned the key and the motor whined.

As if that had been a signal all hell broke loose back at the units. Somebody was firing a submachine gun into the rear door and window of the unit where the dead Dan Miller lay. He must have used up a couple of drums of bullets spraying the room and shooting the lock out of the rear door.

This time the people in the restaurant couldn't miss it. There were yells and the lights went off though the juke box continued to blare out a rock-and-roll tune.

Shayne backed the car out of its parking slot.

The firing stopped and was almost instantly followed by a shattering blast that blew out the front window of the unit in a burst of flame and smoke.

"My God," Ann said from the rear seat. "What was that?"

"Probably a hand grenade," Shayne said, turning the car toward the exit. "He shot the door open and tossed it in. If we'd been there we'd be hamburger now."

He pressed the accelerator. Then he saw the dark sedan moving to block the exit to the main road.

"Everybody on the floor," Shayne said. "Here comes trouble." He held the steering wheel with his left hand and eased the big forty-five caliber automatic out of its holster with his right. His thumb pushed the safety to "off" position.

The other car accelerated. The parking lot was fenced by a low concrete wall and the driver wanted to put his car broadside across the narrow exit so Shayne couldn't get out. The big redhead put his first shot through the windshield on the driver's side. It would have blown the head off a normal-sized driver. The car swerved but was still under control.

"Another midget," Shayne said. "I fired over his head."

His second shot was through the radiator of the car, designed to crack the engine block or smash vital parts of the machinery. There was a burst of smoke and steam from under the hood, and the car swerved headon into the concrete retaining wall.

Shayne drove on out the gate and turned his car west, away from town. Only when he'd put half a mile between himself and the motel did he switch on the headlights.

VI

THE RED FLARE of sunrise over the eastern sky found Mike Shayne driving into the outskirts of North Miami. He hadn't tried to hurry the trip because he'd wanted a chance to talk with Earline Taggert.

The more Mike Shayne saw of the little woman the better he liked her. She had brains and courage and the innate poise, delicacy and sophistication which marked her to the big man as a woman he could respect.

As they drove slowly through the night the two of them talked easily.

"Won't the law be looking for us on account of what happend at the motel?" she asked.

"I don't think so," Shayne told her. "Of course, the county sheriff's office will be looking for somebody, but they won't really know who. I John Smithed the register when we checked in, and none of them got a good look at Ann or Pete. They didn't bother with the license number, either. Those places on the back roads get lazy and careless about such little details. All they really have to look for is a big redhead traveling with his wife and her fa-

ther. Of course, they have a dead dwarf, or what's left of one."

"Oh," she shuddered. "Poor Dan. That sounds so cruel."

"It's whoever shot him that was cruel. Anyway, they have a dead man, and maybe another dead or wounded one in that car that tried to cut us off."

"Who were they, anyway?"

"I was hoping you could tell me that," Shayne said, "or at least that you could give me some sort of idea. When I was fired at first, I thought it was your people that did it. Obviously it wasn't, but I'd almost swear the driver of that car at the motel was a midget or dwarf. By the way, was it you who had my apartment watched when Ann came to see me?"

"No," Earline said.

"That's right," Ann confirmed from the rear seat. "There wasn't any need. They already knew I was going to you."

"As you've probably guessed by now," Earline said, "Ann has been working with us. She felt her father was wrong to take the money, and also that he could never keep it because we'd find him sooner or later."

She might have let it go at that, but Ann spoke again in a bitter and cynical tone. "Tell him the whole truth, Earline. I wasn't being noble, Mike. I'm a practical gal and I knew Pete could never get away with it, so I made a deal. I got Pete's life — for whatever that's worth — and fifty thousand dollars when the money's found. For that I agreed to help them."

"She was to keep in touch so we could follow her father and pick him up after he got the money. In return, we'd take him without violence and pay her what she said. We agreed to it of our own accord." Earline Taggert spoke quietly.

"If you had it all rigged up like that, then why was I hired?" Shayne asked.

"You forget that was Pete's idea," Ann said. "It was him that insisted I get you. I told you something happened in prison that scared the liver out of him. He wouldn't have walked out the prison door unless he saw you standing there with me."

"That brings us right back to where we started," the big detective said thoughtfully. "Who threatened Pete? Who shot at me? Who killed Dan and tried to kill all of us back there? In other words, there's a wild card in this deck some place, and we don't know who he is."

"Couldn't the police have caught him back at the motel?" Ann asked.

Shayne laughed. "A bunch of county deputies? Not much chance. It probably took them half an hour even to get to the scene of the action. If the driver of that car was hurt bad enough, they may have him. If he's alive he won't talk. If he's dead, he can't talk. They won't have the gunsel. Anybody smart enough to pack the sophisticated armament that kid used will have stolen a car and be long gone."

"I'm wondering if they were following you, or Dan and I," Earline said, half to herself.

"I hope it was us," Shayne said. "If so, when they hear about a dead midget in the motel unit, maybe they'll think their man got Pete. That could louse up their plans for a while. If they figure it that way. Of course, we can't know if they will. We can't even know if they were trying to kill Pete, although the way they went at it my guess is we're all supposed to be dead."

"Don't keep saying that," Ann said from the back seat. She fumbled around under the sheet which covered Pete Scarane and came up with the bottle of whiskey. She took a long swallow and offered the bottle. The other two refused.

"That helps," she said. "I feel better with some good old-fashioned instant courage in my gut. What do we do now, Mike?"

"It's near dawn," Shayne said, "and we just crossed the Dade County line. I'm going to stash you and Pete with a friend of mine where you'll be safe. Then I'll take Earline to her friends and come back for you. When Pete comes out of the fog we'll go get that key."

"What'll I tell Pete when he comes to and you aren't there?"

"Just tell him he passed out and we brought him on down the line. Tell him we were tailed, so he wouldn't be safe on the streets by himself. Say I'll give him all the details just as soon as I get back."

"Suppose he wants more details?"

"Tell him he hired me, so he better trust me. Tell him I'll lay it all out for him."

"He can be awful stubborn, Mike."

"Oh, hell," the detective said. "You're a grown woman. Give him another drink or tie him up or something. Just don't let him out on his own until I get back."

VII

IT WAS JUST barely light when Mike Shayne rang the doorbell at the apartment of his long-time friend, Tim Rourke, reporter and feature writer for the Miami *News*. It took some determined ringing and pounding on the door to rouse the sleeping newsman, but finally he came to the door in rumpled pajamas and a pair of run-over slippers.

"Go to hell," he said when he opened the door. Then: "Mike. Mike Shayne," and finally, "I refuse to believe it."

"Shut up," Shayne said, "and let us in. Plug in that electric coffee maker of yours too, while you're at it. Can't you see we're cold and tired?"

"That's right, buster," Ann Scarane said. "You are a pal of Big Red here — prove it."

The lanky frame of the newsman swiveled from side to side as if he had to turn his whole body instead of just his head to take in the scene in the hallway.

"I thought I'd seen it all," he said finally. "All. Positively all. In years of going around with Mike Shayne a guy can get to think that. But I've got to say this sets some sort of new record. The middle of the night and you show up with beautiful women in assorted sizes." He peered at the portion of old Pete's face which stuck out of the sheet. "And what is that, anyway — a suckling pig?"

"That's my father," Ann said. "Get out of our way before I pass him to you to hold. He's heavy."

"She means it, Tim," Shayne said. "Let us in. I can explain everything."

Half an hour — and a huge pot of coffee laced with brandy later — Shayne and Earline Taggert were ready to leave once more. Ann and the still comatose Pete would stay in Tim's apartment until Shayne could come back for them later in the day. It wasn't an ideal arrangement for any of them, but it was the best they could think of at the moment.

"Just be sure you keep Pete here if you have to strap him down," Shayne said in parting. "The worst thing that could happen right now would be for him to be running around in Miami on the loose. If he comes to and wants to argue, just tell him he couldn't make three blocks alive without me to guard him."

"What if he gets away?" Ann asked.

"If he does," Shayne said, "you call Will Gentry and ask him to put out an A.P.B. on the old boy for violation of parole. His boys ought to be able to round up a hungover midget without straining themselves too much."

When they were alone in the elevator Earline Taggert looked up at the big man beside her. "I got the impression you said that for Ann's benefit. Am I right?"

"Partly," Shayne said. "Mostly I want her to repeat it to Pete as soon as he wakes up."

"What are we going to do now? I don't suppose you plan to hold me prisoner as, in effect, you're doing with poor Pete. Have you decided what to do about the money?"

"No," he said, "I haven't quite decided. I believe it's your money, all right. I don't think a person like you would say you could prove it in court unless you could."

"On the other hand, you still feel Pete is your client?"

"That's right. And in spite of what you may have read or heard about private detectives, I've never yet sold out a client. By the same token, I've never helped a thief get away with his loot. I may be in a bind."

They walked out together to the car.

"I'm almost ashamed to say this to you, Mr .Shayne," she said, "but there's a ten-thousand-dollar reward for recovery of the stolen money."

"I'd like to earn it," he said, "if I can do so honestly. By that I mean in a way that checks with my own notion of honesty. On the other hand

I'm bound to guard Pete until he gets his hands on it."

"Yes," she said. "Yes, I can see that. And in view of last night I think he's going to need guarding. After he gets it, though — what do you do after that?"

"First of all," Shayne said, "I'm going to take you to the apartment of my secretary, Lucy Hamilton. You can get some food and rest, and you'll be safe there. You can call anyone you want over her phone, and I'll tell her not to listen in. You can leave any time you want. I'm going to have to trust you not to involve Lucy or put her in danger, but I think I can do that."

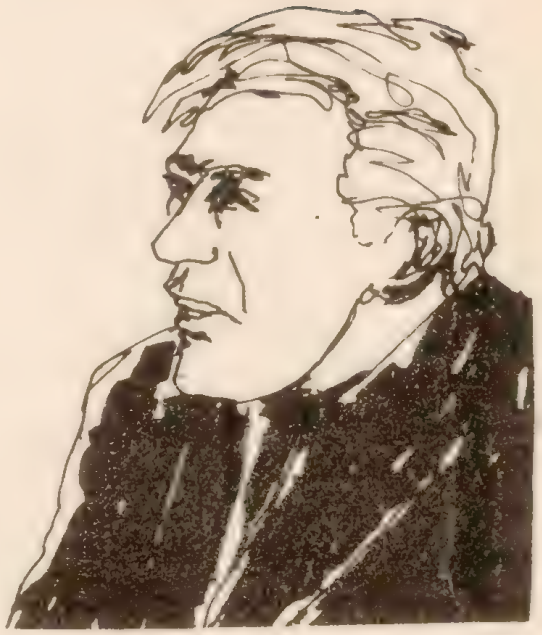
"I promise you," she said. "Now what will you be doing?"

"I'm going to see Big Al Garcia," Shayne said. "I want to talk to him before Pete does. Later on I'm going back to Tim's place and pick up Pete. Anybody" — he looked at her and put emphasis on the words — "anybody who wants to can tail us from there to Big Al's and then again after we leave there to get the money."

"I understand."

"I hope you do, because I think the gunner from last night may be tailing me too. If he or his friends are, then things can get pretty hairy. I'd hate to see you get caught in the middle."

"I'll try not to be." She looked up at him with honest and intelligent grey eyes. "My word of honor, Mike Shayne, I don't know who killed



Dan Miller and tried to kill you. It was no friend of our council, and I hope you get him just as much as you do."

"I believe you," he said. "I want him too, before he makes a third try and gets me. Don't you worry. I'll do my best to nail him before he kills anybody else. Nail them, I suppose I should say. There were at least two at the motel, and God knows how many more who sent them."

She said, "This money should have no blood on it. Not even Pete's blood, for that matter. Our group are peaceful, decent people. We had the dream of founding a community where we could live in peace and in love. We found the land west of Miami and bought it thirty years ago. Then came the war and the postponement of our hopes. Afterward we needed the extra money to

get going again. We made the mistake of listening to Pietro Scarane and his friends and trying to raise funds by the gambling operation. You know how that came out. Now all we want is to recover what is ours so we can make a beginning again."

"I know," Mike Shayne said. "Now I promise you I'll do all that I honestly can to help."

They let it go at that. Shayne took her to Lucy's apartment where they found his secretary awake and ready to fix breakfast for them all. While they ate he explained the situation to Lucy.

"You've got yourself in a fine mess this time, Michael," she said. "How do you propose to get out of it?"

"I'll do the best I can, Angel," the big man said through a mouthful of buttered toast. "If it was just old Pete and Earline's friends, it'd be easy enough. I'd see that he got the money and then let them come in and see it was put in proper legal escrow pending a court order. I think that would be fair to everybody.

"The trouble is there's this joker in the deck, the gang that's doing the shooting. They've killed one man already, so I know they won't hesitate another time. I've got to try watching three ways at once. That isn't easy."

"Why not just turn the whole thing over to the police?" Earline asked. "I think the council might agree to that."

"Pete wouldn't and neither would the killers. No, I've got to do what I always do. Go for broke and handle things as they come up."

VIII

THE FIRST PLACE Mike Shayne went when he left Lucy's apartment was to look for Big Al Garcia. It involved a drive all the way across town to the south side of Miami. Big Al wasn't the sort to be up and in his office before noon, and it was still early morning.

The loan shark boss had one of the big old Mediterranean style mansions on South Miami Avenue. There was a six-foot stone wall around the estate. On top of the stone broken bottle glass had been set in cement. Then there was another two feet of electrified barbed wire.

The strict zoning regulations for the area allowed no barrier more formidable than a four-foot hedge or chain link fencing. Big Al had probably never heard of legal zoning. He preferred his own type to insure privacy.

There were two guards at the estate gateway. Both of them were armed and knew how to use their guns.

"Big Al don't see nobody this early," one said. The other nodded. They stood on the sidewalk outside the wrought-iron gates and grinned at the detective.

That was their mistake.

Mike Shayne's big hands shot out and up and got the two men by the throat before they even knew he moved. They'd been spoiled by too much respectful attention in the recent past.

Shayne cracked their heads together hard enough to stun both of them. He let one fall, but hoisted the man who'd grinned and hung him on the spiked gatetop by his belt. Then he took both their guns and threw them over the wall into the shrubbery.

By this time both men were coming to. The one on the gate struggled and cursed in fluent Sicilian. The other one reached for his gun and found only empty leather.

Shayne reached down and yanked this one to his feet. He was like a child in the big detective's hands.

"That'll teach you two bums not to get smart with strangers," he said. "Now get on your intercom to the house and pass the word to Big Al that Mike Shayne wants to see him. Tell him it's urgent. Tell him it's a matter of life and death."

Ten minutes later he was inside the mansion and waiting in a small room that might have been a library or study. A couple of other guards were watching, but they treated him with respect and had let him keep his gun. Mike Shayne was both known and respected in his own town.

Big Al came down the stairs in crimson pajamas, a purple and gold dressing gown, and bare feet. His face was puffed and unshaven and his bloodshot eyes swollen half shut, but he recognized Shayne and made a gesture of shaking hands.

"I guess I gotta get me a couple new boys for the gate, Mike," he said. "You rough 'em up like that, you sorta spoil their image with me and the rest of the boys."

"They were bums," Shayne said. "Five thumbs on each hand."

Al Garcia laughed. "Okay. Best I find it out now than later. What's this you got to sell about life and death?"

"My life," Shayne said. "That's why it's so important." He outlined briefly the happenings of the past forty-eight hours.

Al Garcia heard him out without interruption.

"Pietro Scarane," he said finally. "Sure, I remember the little creep. Didn't know he was out, though. He come to me and left something I wasn't to turn over to nobody but him. I didn't know what it was all about, but I promised."

"It was about three hundred and fifty grand in hot money," Shayne said.

"Hah! Had I known that, I'd have charged him plenty for the service. Still, my word's my word. I hope you ain't gonna ask me to turn it over to you, Mike. Even if somebody is gunning for you, you know I can't do it. My word has to be good. You understand?"

"I understand, Al. You ought to

be ashamed of yourself thinking I'd ask you to go back on your word. No, all I want you to do is not turn it over to Pete unless I'm here with him at the time."

"How's that?"

"I don't trust him," Shayne said. "Like you just said, he's a little creep. Now that I bring him this far he's likely to think he can make it the rest of the way on his own. If he gets to the money ahead of me, you know damn well he'll cut for it and I'll never see my fee.

"Besides, he was out in never-never-land last night when the killing started. He don't know yet how rough things are. If he tries to run around loose, they'll cut him down for sure. So you wouldn't be doing him any favor.

"Mind now — I'm not asking you to break your word to Pete. Just to wait until I'm with him to give back whatever it is he left with you."

Big Al circled the room a couple of times, scuffing his bare feet in the deep, soft pile of the carpet, before he made up his mind.

"You oughta know I don't like making decisions so early in the morning. It ain't no time for business. Still you're a right guy. I'll buy that."

"I'll appreciate it," Shayne said.

"You'd better," Big Al assured him. "Particularly now — if I hear of all that boodle ending up in your clutch I'll want to see you appreciate old Al. And remember, this don't obligate me to nothing at all once I give Pete his package. After that you and him are strictly on your own. You know that?"

"I know that," Shayne said.

When the redhead left the big house he decided to go back to Tim Rourke's apartment. Old Pete should be coming out from under the sleeping pills by this time, and Mike Shayne wasn't at all sure how Scarane would react to all that had taken place.

He didn't trust the old fellow. After all, he'd told the detective nothing but lies up to this point. He'd lied to, and stolen from, his own associates at the time of the circus robbery. There was every indication he'd try to doublecross the big redhead and his own daughter now.

Come to think of it, Shayne didn't trust the daughter Ann, either. Apparently she'd made a calculated betrayal of her father already, balancing an almost certain fifty thousand dollars against a highly problematical split of the total swag. Anybody who could sell out once was perfectly capable of doing a repeat performance at any time.

Most of all, Shayne was bothered by the mysterious and deadly followers who had already killed Dan Miller. He didn't really believe for a moment that they'd given up or been shaken off the trail.

Whoever these people were, they'd already proven themselves to be both ruthless and remarkably well informed. Wherever he went they

turned up, and inevitably they came in for the kill like rabid wolves. He was confident he'd have to deal with these people in some sort of showdown before this case ended and that his own life would be on the line when that time came.

Most of all, it worried him that these people seemed to know in advance what his every move would be.

Shayne put his car in the parking lot of the expensive northeast side condominium where Tim Rourke had his apartment and walked over to the main entrance. The waters of Biscayne Bay sparkled in the sun nearby and a gentle breeze tuned the palm fronds to their usual dry rattling cacaphony.

There was nothing at all out of the way in a typical Miami morning, but Shayne felt an unaccountable impulse to hurry.

Inside the lobby lights told him that the self-service elevator was already on its way down. He waited, as a man will, without paying particular attention to what was going on. The elevator came to a stop and the door slid noiselessly open on its track.

There were two men inside. One of them was carrying an oversized and apparently overly heavy leather suitcase. They both wore dark suits and soft brim felt hats.

They looked at Mike Shayne with hooded eyes and stiff, expressionless faces that put him instantly on guard. Otherwise he might never have noticed when the suitcase jerked violently as if it had a life of its own.

The men both saw Shayne's hand start for his belt-holstered forty-five. They came out of the elevator together, stepping a little aside to box him and take him from both sides at once.

Shayne's left hand straightened and jabbed and took the man with the suitcase on the side of the throat. The man dropped the bag, clutched at his throat, staggered and fell over the tall ceramic jar full of sand that waited for cigarette butts by the side of the doors.

The other man grabbed for Shayne's gun arm with both hands. The big redhead stepped into the attack instead of trying to pull away and kneed the man. That was all he had to do.

With both attackers on the floor, Shayne scooped up the suitcase in one big hand, stepped into the elevator, and punched the button for Tim Rourke's floor.

When he got there the door was shut tight. Shayne had to use one of his lock-picks to get it open, but that fact only held him up for a matter of seconds.

"Cheap hardware," he said under his breath.

Inside the apartment he found Tim Rourke and Ann Scarane tied up side by side and laid out on the living room carpet. One of the hoods, with an unsuspected sense of humor, had taken two glass candleholders off the mantel and carefully

set one on the floor by each head.

Rourke struggled to free himself and almost choked as a result. His face was purple back of a gag improvised from a pair of his best winter-weight wool socks. Ann hadn't wasted any effort.

Shayne cut the gag off Rourke's face so he could breathe and then went to work on the girl's bonds. When she was free, he motioned to her to finish untying the newshawk.

Only then did Shayne open the big suitcase he'd brought up in the elevator with him. As he expected, he found Pietro Scarane tied and gagged inside. The little man was red-faced and spitting mad. He also had a combined dope and whiskey hangover that would have laid out a giant, let alone a midget.

He spat cottony saliva and lurid profanity out of his mouth and howled with the pain as blood circulation returned to his cramped and stiffened limbs.

Mike Shayne looked down at the three of them on the floor.

"Like a damn bunch of kids," he said. "Can't leave you alone for an hour but you get yourselves in trouble."

Then the big man put back his head and commenced to roar with laughter. He laughed until his knees got weak and he had to collapse into one of Rourke's big easy chairs. Every time he looked at the three of them he laughed harder. It was the first relaxation he'd had in two days.

"Oh, shut up," Tim Rourke said.

When Mike Shayne finally stopped laughing, Ann Scarane tried to explain.

"Pete was coming around when it happened. Mr. Rourke had him out in the kitchen mixing up a hangover cure. When somebody knocked at the door I thought it was you come back. I opened the door just a little to see, and they pushed it all the way open and came in. One of them held a gun on me so I couldn't yell a warning, while the other went into the kitchen after Pete and Mr. Rourke."

"A hell of a bodyguard you are," Pete Scarane snarled at Shayne. "First you let my own daughter slip me a Mickey. Then when I need you you ain't here. What in hell am I payin' you for anyhow, Shayne?"

"So far you haven't paid me anything," Shayne said practically. "So I don't think you got any kick coming. Nothing for nothing is an even trade in my book."

"You're all bums," Scarane snarled. "Like everybody else you're ganged up to rob a poor old midget."

"Shut up, you fool," his daughter told him. "Whether you know it or not Mike saved your life last night while you were out like a light. Not to mention getting you back from those two hoods who'd have killed you like as not."

"I don't think they would," Shayne said. "That pair work for a private detective agency on the Beach. At

least one of them does. I've seen him before. Whoever hired them might have cut your throat though, Pete."

"Just let me out of here," Scarane said. "I can take care of myself."

"Not today you can't," Shayne said. "For one thing Big Al won't give you a match unless I'm with you."

IX

IT WAS LATE afternoon before they left Tim Rourke's apartment. Old Pete had insisted that he didn't want to reach their final destination until after dark, and Mike Shayne hadn't seen any point in arguing with the old midget. His one real aim now was to keep Scarane alive until the money was recovered and Earline Taggert's friends from the Little People had a chance to catch up with them.

Both Ann Scarane and Tim Rourke insisted on going along, although Shayne would have preferred to leave them behind. If it should come to a fight, the fewer non-professionals he had to look after the better he'd like it. Mike Shayne had a very educated guess that it would come to a fight before the night was over.

He'd used the daytime to cook and eat a hearty meal and then stretch out on Rourke's bed for a long and badly needed nap. This time he'd secured both front and rear doors to the apartment by wedging chair backs under the knobs. He didn't expect to be disturbed by any further attacks and he wasn't.

The other three were too keyed up to sleep. Ann had slept for a while in the car's rear seat while Shayne was driving to Miami — and Rourke and Scarane hadn't missed a moment's sleep.

Ann and Tim Rourke spent most of the afternoon getting acquainted over a shaker of martinis. Both of them seemed to enjoy themselves thoroughly.

The old midget growled and cursed and fought his hangover. Though he cast longing looks at the martinis, he managed somehow to resist temptation. This was Pete Scarane's big day, and he wasn't forgetting it. If he got drunk now, he'd blow the reward for his theft and for the years spent in prison. He'd be just a dead broke old ex-con with no one to turn to and no place to lay his head.

When it was time to leave Scarane demanded a gun. At first Shayne refused to let him have one.

"You're on parole," he said. "If

you carry a gun, that puts you in violation."

"If I don't carry one," the old man snarled at them, "it could put me in a hole in the ground. A man has a right to defend himself, and I won't move a step unless I'm packing a rod. You can like it or leave it."

"He's right," his daughter said. "It could be murder not to let him be armed." She fished in her bag and brought out an aluminum-framed, lightweight, snub-nosed thirty-eight special. She spun the cylinder to check it, and then handed it over. "Here, Dad. Carry it in good health."

"Bear witness it wasn't me gave it to him," Shayne said, as the old man put the gun in his waistband under his shirt. Then to Ann: "How about you? Do you want to borrow one of Tim's guns?"

She shook her head. "Don't worry about me. I've got the twin to that one here in the bag. I brought that one special for my old man."

Tim Rourke also insisted upon donning a shoulder holster complete with an automatic.

Their first stop was a bar and restaurant owned by Big Al Garcia on the Boulevard just north of the downtown area. Shayne and Scarane went together into the second-floor office where Garcia was waiting for them.

With a flourish, heightened by the loan shark king's well-developed sense of the dramatic, he opened the big wall vault and took out a small package wrapped in canvas, bound with many turns of picture wire and secured by big blobs of red sealing wax.

"Here it is, Pete, old friend," Garcia said. "Just exactly like it was the day you give it to me. Look close and you'll even see the thumb print you made in that there wax when we sealed her up right here in this office."

Pete Scarane took the package and examined it closely under the light of the desk lamp. "Okay. Okay," he said with a long sigh of relief. "I never doubted your word, Al. This is it."

"What do you aim to do now, old buddy?" Garcia asked. "The way Mike here tells me, you're gonna need protection. For a fee I could send some of my boys along to help out. Of course, you unnerstand there'd have to be a fee."

"He's got protection," Shayne said, "and he won't be able to stand another fee on top of mine."

Old Pete was cradling the little package in his hands as if he was afraid to let go of it even for a minute.

"He told it, Al," he said firmly. "You'll get what I promised you when I have the stuff. You know it. Outside of that Mike Shayne's all the protection I need."

"Have it your way," Garcia said. "I just sorta hate to miss the fun though."

"Let's go," the midget said.

Garcia went to the front door of the restaurant with them. "So long, little buddy. Good luck go with you."

Shayne and Scarane got back in the car where Rourke and Ann were waiting. Scarane said to drive north on the Boulevard and then turn west.

"Are you sure we ain't being followed?" he asked Shayne.

"I'm just about sure we are," the big private detective said. "Oh, I haven't spotted anybody yet and I probably won't in this heavy traffic. They're out there some place though. They have been all the time since you walked out the prison door, and they won't quit now. All they *had* to do was watch Big Al's and pick us up when we showed there. On the other hand, maybe they didn't even have to do that."

"What do you mean, they didn't have to do that?"

"These people have been one step ahead of me all the way," Shayne said. "All I've had to go on are the lies you've picked out to tell me. They seem to know in advance what comes next. Like they know more than I do. Maybe even as much as you know. In that case maybe they're already at your next stop and just waiting for us to come along."

"That's one hell of a happy thought," Tim Rourke said from the back seat.

Shayne ignored him. "Who besides you knows what comes next, Pete?"

"Nobody. No damn body at all," the midget said viciously. "Ann, she knows where we're going, but that's all. Only me can get to the stuff. Anybody else tries it — boom. They get blown to hell. I got that stuff booby-trapped but good. Why else you think they don't even dare try to blast it loose all this time?"

"Who's they? Tell me that, Pete. Who wants it that bad except you?"

"Everybody," Scarane said. "The whole world. The council, Big Al, maybe you, Mike. Maybe even this loving daughter that gives her old dad Mickey Finns. It won't do you no good, though. None of you. Only old Pietro got the two keys. One here"—tapping the package—"and the other one safe in here," putting a stubby finger to his brow. "You all got to wait for me."

Shayne began to think that the old man had gone mad. His tone and the feral gleam in his little eyes both smacked of insanity.

"I believe you, Pete," the detective said soothingly. "Just take it easy. I'll get you there."

The old man's directions took them north and then out to the western fringes of the town of Opa Locka beyond what had once been the big naval air complex of hangars and landing strips. They took a little-travelel rural road looping back toward the edge of the South Florida Drainage District on the rim of the Everglades. There were scattered houses along the road.

Their ultimate destination was a decrepit and rundown building that had once been used as a roadhouse

and tavern. Its signs were long faded; paint peeling from the concrete block; windows boarded over smashed panes of glass. The parking space was weed-grown and the car headlights picked out a big snake that slithered away into the darkness.

"This is it?" Tim Rourke asked.

"This is it," the old man snickered. "Pete's place that I bought years and years ago. Don't look like no palace now, does it? It's my own sort of Fort Knox, though. That's what it is."

Scarane got out of the car and the rest of them followed him. He started to rip off the wrappings of the package Big Al had given him. Under the elaborate coverings was an ordinary cigar box fastened with twine. Scarane broke the twine. The box appeared to be filled with shredded newspaper. He dug around in this for a bit and came up with a perfectly ordinary looking key.

"This is for the front door of my palace," he said.

"Throw it away," Shayne told him. "That lock's rusted out years ago."

The big man went over and proved his word by pulling off the wooden slats nailed across the entrance. Then he got the ancient door off its hinges with one hearty kick.

"Never you mind," Pete Scarane said. "The next one's more important."

He led the way into the abandoned front room which had once held the bar and juke box. Back of it was another windowless room, which obviously had once been the office.

Shayne and Tim Rourke had powerful flashlights. Under old Pete's directions they pulled rotted oilcloth off the office floor and found a trapdoor, which came up to reveal a flight of steps leading down to a small, square concrete-walled cellar room.

"Ann, you and Tim stay up here," Shayne said. "If you see anybody skulking around, come and warn us. Don't try to shoot them. Just let me know."

He and Scarane went into the cellar. There was an old cupboard in one corner and back of it the steel front of a good-quality wall safe.

"This is it," Pete Scarane said. "All these years it's been guarding the money for me. Safe it was. Safe in the safe. Perfectly beautiful and safe in the safe."

"I don't understand," Shayne said. "By the looks of it any good cracksman could have opened that box any time he wanted."

"Sure," the midget said. This time his chuckle was really insane. "Only he wouldn't want. I got it rigged with TNT. He opens this and — *boom*. First I got to use the combination."

He went to the safe and bent over the dial while Shayne held the light for him. After a moment the redhead heard the lock click free.

"Don't touch a thing," Pete Sca-

rane said. "This is the part kept my money safe."

He groped in the cigar box and came up with a flat piece of metal, curiously fretted and punched like a computer card.

"This is the little darling," he said. "I put her in this slot here and she neutralizes the detonator mechanism to the explosive charge. I got to put her in just right or she blows anyway. That's to keep anybody from holding a gun on me while I do it. That's why I couldn't trust anybody but you to bring me here, Mike."

After inserting the metal "key" he pulled the door of the safe open. The box was full of neatly wrapped bundles of greenbacks, and a couple of folded canvas sacks. The old man began taking the money out and putting it into the sacks.

"I'm sorry, Shayne," he said then. "You've been a big help."

"Don't try any double-cross," Mike Shayne told him. "I can pull a gun a lot faster than you can."

The answering chuckle really was that of a crazy man. "Sure you can, Mike. Sure you can. Only my darling daughter, my sweet Ann, is already pointing a gun at the back of your head."

"He's right, Mike," the girl's voice said from the top of the steps. "Rourke's all tied up tight, and I've got the drop on you. You don't think I'd let you give all that money to dear Earline and her bunch, do you?

I don't want to kill you, Mike, but I will if you go for that gun of yours."

Old Pete pulled the gun Ann had given him out of his belt. "Don't be silly, Ann. We got to kill him and that fool friend of his too. Only let me have the fun. He's so big, so high and mighty like. I want him to know that a little man cut him down."

He pointed the gun in Shayne's face and pulled the trigger. There was nothing but a clicking noise. He looked at the gun in his hand and all the color drained out of his face.

"That's right, father dear," the girl said. "I gave you that gun and I filed the firing pin off first. I couldn't bear to think of your having all that money any more than Earline and her people."

"I thought it might be you," Shayne said suddenly. "It had to be one of the two of you. And I knew if I brought you here, you'd show your hand."

"Sure," Ann said. "It was my friends who killed Dan Miller. Only they overplayed the hand. That grenade would have killed me too. I guess they wanted it all. After that they knew I wouldn't help them, so they tried to snatch Pete out of Tim's place. Too bad you wouldn't help me, Mike. I gave you every chance to go along with me."

"What now?" Shayne asked, never taking his eyes off the tensed girl. He got braced to make his play, but the girl's leveled gun saved him. He'd wait for a better break.

"You know what now," she said. "I have to kill you both; and then Tim, of course. And the money's all mine!"

Old Pete Scarane said nothing at all, but his hand fumbled again in the cigar box full of shredded paper. This time it came up quickly with an old-fashioned forty-four rimfire derringer.

He and his daugther fired together. They must have died within a split second of each other. Their blood mingled in a pool on the concrete floor. Some of it soaked the canvas sack into which Pete Scarane had been stuffing the money.

Mike Shayne grunted — stared long at the two bodies. He turned away and headed toward the stairs. He had to untie Tim Rourke and then find a telephone to call his friend, Chief Will Gentry of the Miami police.

Read: In the NEXT issue:

WE'RE ALL KILLERS

The New MIKE SHAYNE *Short Novel*

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Brett Halliday, in next month's great lead novel, puts Mike Shayne in perhaps the tightest danger spot of his career. For this time he is fighting against not only a vicious ring of killers outside the law but a police force targeting for his scalp. "This time you've gone too far, Shayne. This time it's murder. And murder means the chair."

D-DAY MINUS ONE

Smiling, he waited for his tryst with she who had sent him to hell . . .

by

BETTY

REN

WRIGHT

AT FIVE-THIRTY only the three of them were left in the office.

Priscilla's head throbbed, and her hands were icy. She looked over at her husband, who sat staring at the chart spread out on his desk. Probably, she thought, he hadn't even noticed that the big room had emptied. The sales chart hypnotized him, its jagged wanderings translated at a glance into figures and trends and projections.

She could never understand its fascination, but she was thankful that he loved his work. Some men became lost in a big corporation, but Ted had found his place and relished it, never pushing, waiting without bitterness or envy for management to recognize the value of what he had accomplished.

And they had, at last. The whole vast room was his now, the charts and diagrams, the files, the tapes. And the problems. She bent to take her typewriter cover from the bottom drawer and let her gaze move down the room to the farthest corner, where Corey Devoe sat writing.

What was he trying to prove? she asked herself furiously. His orders

for the day had been turned in forty-five minutes early, as usual, and as as usual they were full of errors. He had spent at least half an hour on the telephone arguing with the electric company over the size of his bill, and another fifteen minutes filing a claim with his laundry for a lost shirt. He had taken three coffee breaks that she knew of and had been pretending to be busy.

It was disgusting. She concentrated her anger, preferring rage to the terror that had made shambles of the afternoon.

As she watched, Corey stood up. He turned to Ted, and his expression was one of pure malevolence. Priscilla gasped and he swung toward her, forcing a grimace that was supposed to be a smile. She dropped her gaze and began rummaging through her purse, not looking up again until he had walked the length of the room and vanished through the double door.

"Ted, shall we go?"

He glanced up from the chart, and she saw by his expression that she had been right. He hadn't noticed that for everyone else the work day had ended. She hurried across to his desk and stood close to him, rubbing the back of his neck gently while he pushed papers and pencils into some semblance of order for the night.

"It's nice to look up and find you here," he said. "I'm going to miss it."

"I am too," she said. "But the company's right about wives not working for their husbands. I don't think I could stand the strain. After just these few days I'm a wreck listening to the ordinary coffee-break complaints and wondering if they expect you to work miracles overnight."

Ted stood up and gave her a quick kiss.

"Not your problem," he said. "And after tomorrow I'll start working on the complaints. Worst things first, as my Irish grandmother used to tell me."

"You never had an Irish grandmother." She waited, struggling to keep her voice level. "What's tomorrow?"

"D-Day—Devoe Day. Might as well get it over." He glanced at her, and she felt wholly transparent as he easily recognized what she was trying to hide. "No need to get upset about it, honey. The guy's been expecting to get booted out for a long time. It won't come as a big surprise. His work is terrible; he can't get along with people. He must know what's coming."

She reached into her purse and gave him the envelope she had found in her center desk drawer after lunch. The message was typed on plain white paper; it could be the work of anyone in the office. Without looking at it again, she could recall every word:

I'm writing this because a lot of us are worried, Pris. We don't want to make trouble for anyone,

but Corey is doing some threatening. He thinks he might be fired, and he says he'll kill Ted if it happens. Some of us believe him. Ted better be careful because this guy is really sick.

"You're not going to be worried by this, are you?" Ted asked, but she saw that his face was white. "Look, honey, you know it has to be done. I don't like firing people —I've never had to do it before. But getting rid of Devoe went with this job. The company realizes he never should have been allowed to stay around this long, and they want him out. It's my department now."

She nodded, thinking of how long she had waited for him to be able to say those words. She had confided once to her brother that she was afraid the company would never recognize Ted's ability or appreciate his loyalty. Craig had shrugged it off.

"You're probably right," he had said. "Ted's a good guy, and you know where good guys finish."

Well, Craig had been wrong. With this promotion Ted earned more than anyone on her side of the family, and his opinions were sought and valued. In a week's time he had become a different man, really—still loving, the perfect companion, still considerate and unassuming toward the rest of the world, but with a new, proud firmness of manner that she found delightful.

If something should happen now

to spoil things—She felt all her defenses crumble at the thought of what that something might be. There was a secret, permanently frightened Priscilla who knew exactly how much of her own well-being depended on her husband's being close beside her. That hidden Priscilla cowered before the sheet of white paper which Ted crumpled now and tossed into the wastebasket.

"I'm not upset," she said carefully. "Just tired. Glad to be leaving the fierce world of business." Her voice quavered in spite of all she could do. "You'll be careful, won't you? You'll watch out for that—that animal!"

"Of course I will."

"Do you have to fire him?"

"You know the answer to that, love." He put his arm around her shoulder, moving her toward the door. "Get your coat and the car and meet me out in front. I want to leave some reports in the mailroom."

Walking down the long corridor

toward the women's locker room, Priscilla struggled with her panic. She had imagined many times walking this hallway for the last time, putting on her coat and going home to stay. It had been one of her favorite daydreams. But the reality was spoiled by the thought of Corey Devoe. She could picture his look of hatred so clearly that it was hardly a surprise when he stepped from a doorway and stood in her path.

"Hiya, Pris." An insinuating voice, wide, assessing eyes that peered through a smiling mask. She felt ill with revulsion.

"I was waiting for you, Pris. I wanted to tell you we'll miss you around here."

"Thanks." She wondered if he could see her trembling.

"You brightened up the old place," "and it could use some brightening. Not that I'm complaining," he went on deliberately. "You know, this job is all I've got."

He stared at her so hard that she almost believed that the hidden, terrified Priscilla was visible to him.

"If you don't really like it here," she said, "why don't you find something else?"

"At fifty-five?" The smile slid away, and she realized that he did see that other Priscilla and was going to make her suffer in full measure. "Where would I go?" he whined. "What would I do?"

Corey went on without waiting for her to attempt an answer. "I'm staying right here," he said. "If anyone tried to take my job away from me, I guess I'd kill him. That's an awful thing to say, isn't it?"

"Yes," she whispered, "Yes, it is." The hallway seemed to be closing in, pushing her backward as Corey loomed larger. His voice, harsh now and persistent, racketed through her brain.

"Just the thought of looking for another job at my age scares me, Pris," he said. "It really scares me. If anyone put me in that position, I'd get even whatever way I could."

She wanted to say the obvious, that killing Ted would not save his job. But the words wouldn't come. She put out a hand and pushed him aside. The door of the locker room swung shut behind her, and she sank down on a couch, crying. *Sick,* she thought, *he really is sick.*

And yet she couldn't equate the threat, the ugliness in his face and and voice, with a condition actually beyond his control. Evil was the word for him. He hated Ted, he hated her, and he would not hesitate to kill Ted and empty her life of its importance.

The vinyl covering of the couch was cool against her cheek. After a few moments she got up and patted powder on her face. Her locker was empty except for her coat and gloves and a snapshot of her and Ted together; she had been taking things home for a week

in preparation for her final day. She loosened the tape and put the snapshot into her bag, her hands shaking violently. Then she left the locker room, switching out the light behind her.

The stairway to the underground garage was just down the hall. She ran to it, beginning to cry again as the familiar gloom of the big garage reached up to meet her. *No*, she thought, *it can't happen like that—not to us!*

The car was parked at the far end of the garage. She ran down the driving lane, slipping and almost falling twice on oily places on the concrete. One of her shoes came off, and she turned back for it, then ran again without bothering to put the shoe on her foot.

In the car she took a deep breath and tried to force herself to calm down. Ted was waiting upstairs on the street for her, and he could help her get control of herself. If there were no Ted waiting for her she'd . . .

She guided the car into the driving lane, moving slowly. She was about halfway to the ramp when the door to the stairwell opened, and Corey came into the garage. His big eyes were narrowed against the sudden dimness, his hands thrust confidently into the pockets of his jacket. She saw the satisfied little grin on his face, and she knew as surely as if she could read his thoughts that he was reviewing their conversation and was pleased with the way it had gone.

He is sick, she told herself again, but there was no one to listen, least of all the hidden, screaming Priscilla who, with no warning at all, thrust the gas pedal all the way down to the floor.

Next Month's Trio of Headliners

●

WE'RE ALL KILLERS by BRETT HALLIDAY

The New Mike Shayne Short Novel.

MURDER ON LAZY RIVER by EDWARD Y. BREESE

A New Johnny Hawk Novelet

DEATH OF MY UNCLE ROBERT by HUGH WALPOLE

A "Department of Lost Stories" Masterpiece

THE MYSTERY OF THE FABULOUS LAUNDRYMAN

A Story That Might Be True

By BEN HECHT

DEPARTMENT of LOST STORIES

Both before and after Ben Hecht, teamed with McArthur, wrote "The Front Page," Hecht had been famous for his unusual and stirring short stories. Newspaperman, bon vivant and raconteur without a peer, Ben Hecht needs no kudos to add to the fame he amassed during his productive and glamorous writing career. It is a pleasure and a privilege to include "The Mystery of the Fabulous Laundryman" in our Department of Lost Stories. Even now, after forty years, it retains the freshness and wry humor, mixed with suspense, that it had originally. From time to time in this magazine you will see this department. When you do, read with care and discrimination. You will be reading a story which, whatever its field, whatever its length, has been remembered and revered as too good to be forgotten. It is a rare gift we bring you this month. The famous Ben Hecht never wrote a bad story — and this is one of his best. Read it. You'll remember it for a long time.

THE EDITORS

I WILL WRITE this story out as it was told to me, with the hope that you will believe believe it as did I listening to the bibulous and rococo verbiage of Mr. Dick McCarey.

In the days when I was a newspaperman such a tale as my friend McCarey unleashed between his first and fifteenth drinks in that buzzing Harlem speakeasy would have sent me bouncing into the night to run it down; nor would I have rested till the last detail had been garnered and verified and the whole thing emblazoned across a front page.

A statement, this, which such of my erstwhile editors as happen upon these words may very likely challenge with snorts. But what newspaperman, having quit that daft profession, but remembers himself as one of its heroes?

And this is not so much a boast as an obeisance to a lost and glamorous vocation. The bravos of the press today seem to me a less gaudy lot than those I once knew as colleagues.

This McCarey, however, who will in a moment take the floor, is of that species which rather egotisti-

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cally I choose to fancy extinct. He is of that tribe that once practiced journalism as if it were holy orders.

McCarey was sitting by himself in a corner of the noisy barroom when I spied him this night, and he was a man full of truculence, as I expected him to be, although I hadn't seen him for a year.

"Hello," I said. "How's Parnell this evening?"

McCarey looked up, and from the fact that his eyes failed to blaze at the name Parnell I knew that the highball before him was his first. McCarey grinned and beckoned me to sit opposite him.

"What are you doing in this *foul* town?" he said, laboring as always under the delusion that I was, despite five years' residence in Manhattan, an alien. But this was a rather general attitude held by McCarey toward men and women encountered in the secret barrooms that were his stamping ground — that they were all aliens, all wanderers, with their hearts in faraway places.

"Still in search of fame and fortune," I answered him.

"Oho!" said McCarey and sneered.

His voice will bear mentioning, that you might hear him. It was a husky, rushing voice whose most characteristic tones were those of boundless and derogatory anger. He spoke chiefly in sneers, but the sneers, these, not of small frustration but of a large and tumultuous romanticism which found the world too dingy for its practice.

Then, looking me slowly up and down, McCarey remarked: "Same old suit of clothes, eh?"

I nodded, and this brief confession of my unimproved estate appeared to lighten the McCarey mood.

His swollen but still boyish face relaxed, his lip curled, and his Celtic eye softened.

"How's the world been treating you?" I said.

"The world," said McCarey, "has seen fit to harass me beyond the power of speech. You are looking upon a man who is one of the foul favorites of misfortune."

Turning to the bartender some thirty feet to the leeward, McCarey cried out: "Here, you foul Corsican! Another glass of that peculiar liquor."

"I'll have one too," I said.

McCarey held up two fingers and the barkeep nodded.

"What," I inquired, "is the general cause of your depression—women, debts, or the ennui of a sensitive soul?"

"The cause of my depression," said McCarey, "is a laundryman. What a laundryman!" His eyes fluttered and a sigh shook the McCarey frame from head to foot. "You are looking upon a man," he added, falling after a pause into his favorite rodomontade, "who bears in his bosom a secret so fabulous, so heartbreaking, as to render him speechless. Speechless!" he repeatedly loudly—and favored the drinkers draped

around the bar in front of us with a carnivorous glare.

"Let's get out of this fish trap," he said, after having sneered and squinted separately at a dozen of the customers. "Hey, you peculiar Aztec!" This brought the waiter. *"Rechnung, bitte. Verstehen sie?* The bill," he added, translating contemptuously. "Here are your thirty pieces of silver," he said, with a high aversion for the whole transaction. To me he said, "Come on."

I started for the door. But McCarey moved in an arc, and with an unexpected list tacked into an unoccupied corner. Here, overturning a chair and kicking it savagely out of his path, he sat down in another.

"*Oberkellner!*" he bawled. "Hey, you foul Swiss! Some service here. If you please!"

McCarey would have fought for Parnell now.

"This place," he confided abruptly to me, "has one asset which distinguishes it among its horrible ilk. It is the watering trough of that foulest of all bipeds, Monsoor Gavin, my esteemed city editor."

"What paper are you on now?" I asked.

"None!" said McCarey loudly. "I have tonight severed my association with the depraved press, and as soon as Gavin sticks his snout into this tallyho I am going to cool him off and lay him to rest."

McCarey, despite his scowl, seemed appeased by this pronouncement. He smiled sullenly and, ogling the doorway through which his enemy was to appear, lifted his glass and seemed to drink not his liquor but his foe's very blood.

"I would like to tell you about this laundryman," he said. "One reason being that it is slowly driving me mad. And the other being that Gavin is a toad among toads, a snake and a varlet whom it will give me a great pleasure to betray. Foully."

This last word was a happy mouthful.

"The laundryman's name was Meyer," he went on. "What was that name that Mary Queen of Scots had written on her heart?"

"Calais," I said.

"Calais," repeated McCarey. "Well, the name Meyer is written on my heart. Meyer the laundryman."

Again McCarey laughed cruelly, as if there were within him a Greek chorus cued to deride his hurt whenever he expressed it. Having ended his laughter, however, he looked at me with so appealing an eye that I nodded sympathetically.

"May the angels guard his sleep," he said.

"Is this laundryman dead?" I asked.

"Yes, thank God," said McCarey, "Dead and under a slab in potter's field."

"What happened to him?" I asked.

"Words fail me," said McCarey, and his eye — the one that wasn't squinting — clouded with tears. He

swallowed his fifth drink in silence.

"Let's hear," I insisted.

"Well, I can't tell you everything," he said. "My lips are sealed regarding certain matters. I'm sorry."

McCarey assumed the look of a sibyl and for several minutes he gazed at me darkly.

"I can tell you this much," he said finally. "Myer died on a hot night a month ago, shot through the head twice — and his right hand chopped off at the wrist, for good measure. But I don't want you to misunderstand me. I am not one who sits in mourning for Meyer's death. It's his living, his ten years over the washtub in Harlem, that unnerves me when I think of it."

McCarey grew grave and squinted with both eyes.

"I can tell you this much," he said. "He was a short, thin old man with a thoughtful face and a weak chin. He came to Harlem ten years ago and moved into one of those putrid tenements on Troop Street — a hovel reeking with poverty and disaster. That's the kind of a home Meyer moved into," grinned McCarey as if in derision of his literary flourishes.

"He took a single room, renting it off a monstrous wench named Mrs. Maum. An oily, sweating behemoth in a wrapper, who tipped the scales at three hundred and fourteen pounds. One of those female hippogriffs that seem to thrive best, peculiarly enough, in districts where food and space are scarcest."

Another drink was directed with grace and thoughtfulness down the McCarey gullet.

"Meyer moved in with this unsightly piece of tenement fauna," he went on, "and started taking in washing. Yes; he pursued his career as a laundryman in the basement. You know what he did? He went around all day soliciting customers. And then on the next day he ruled at the tubs. Nobody ever looked at him or spoke to him. He just shuffled back and forth, fetching his wash and carrying it in a basket — on his head, by God. On his head in a basket," repeated McCarey. "Tie that!"

I nodded blankly at this challenge.

"Tie that!" insisted McCarey, full of an odd excitement.

I changed my tactics and this time shook my head in impotence, and McCarey was appeased.

"I thought so," he said, and looked grim. "It's a foul world," he added, "full of horrible and fantastic things."

Again there was silence, during which McCarey communed and debated the ways of life and washed down the secret results of his cerebration with another highball.

"Well, there's no use in hiding anything," he resumed. "Anyway I can tell you this much. This foul Madam Maum was a widow with a weazened and half-idiot babe in arms when Meyer moved in. And what attracted her beautiful ferret's

eyes was the fact that Meyer spent all his hard-earned nickels buying new bolts for his doors, putting steel bars across his windows, and boarding himself in like some daffy old boy with a nightmare on his heels."

McCarey paused to ogle the door, and his thoughts shifted angrily.

"Monsoor Gavin," he said, "is overdue. His dog sled is usually along by this time."

"What's wrong with the monsoor?" I asked.

"Very many things," said McCarey, and fell to making menacing faces at his liquor glass. Then he laughed cruelly and said with a growl: "He didn't have a friend. Not a friend."

"Who?" I asked.

"Meyer. Meyer," said McCarey. "Meyer, this fabulous laundryman. Not a human soul to talk to. Not one human being to take his hand."

"And why should they do that?" I asked.

"Because," said McCarey, "he was the loneliest, saddest creature alive in the world. What a life for *him!*"

"Who?" I asked.

And my friend McCarey shut his eyes and laughed with greater cruelty than ever this evening.

"There are some things that can't be told" he said. "But this much I can tell you. He was up at dawn, washing in the tubs. In the afternoon he tottered through the streets, that foul basket on his head. He always showed up at six in a cigar store a block away and bought a package of cigarettes. One package a day. And then home and to bed and asleep behind his bolts and bars by eight."

"Not very interesting," I said.

"Is that so," said McCarey, ogling me as if I had been transformed into the mysterious foe

Monsoor Gavin himself. "Is that so!" he repeated. "Well I beg to differ."

Rebuked, I beat to the leeward and inquired casually: "What happened to Meyer?"

"All these peculiar didos on the part of this laundryman," said McCarey, "stirred the female curiosity of that horrible creature Mrs. Maum, who began to set her cap for Meyer. And there," he deflected himself with a snarl, "there you have the eternal feminine. Love coming to bud among the ash cans. Cupid bombarding this hippogriff with a battering ram. This dismal squaw used to lie in wait for Meyer as he came shuffling home, puffing on a cigarette. Ready to make wassail, she was. Primed for the kill,

her five chins and three stomachs jiggling seductively. But Meyer was proof against these blandishments. He chose to ignore them. He said good evening to her, and so much for romance. But, mark you, there was a woman scorned and roundly."

"Come on, Dick," I said quietly. "Who was this Meyer?"

But McCarey appeared not to hear this question, which had begun to aggravate me. A smoky look was on his face.

"Imagine this man," said McCarey, "living like that for ten years. Friendless and chained to a washtub like a Carthaginian slave! All sorts of fantastic things happened in the world during these ten years, but none of them as fantastic as this that I'm telling you. Meyer at the washtubs, Meyer with a basket on his head. And nothing as heartbreaking. What a laundryman!"

I settled back in my chair, deciding on silence and indifference as the most effective measures. But McCarey was walking the ways of his secret and had no eyes for my tactics. He drank with dignity as I kept silent, and appeared to be toasting the dead-and-gone hero of his tale.

"Monsoor Gavin," he said, setting the glass on the table with ominous poise, "has heard that I am lying in wait for him and is shunning this horrible rendezvous like a plague spot."

"Let's hear of Meyer's death," I said.

"On a hot night," said McCarey with an unexpected rush of words, "full of that summer steam which the dwellings of the poor begin to exhale no sooner does the foul sun go down, and in a darkness mixed with dust, cinders, and disease, Meyer was done to death and his right hand chopped off.

"I can tell you this much and no more." McCarey squinted cautiously at me. "The police arrived at ten o'clock and found Meyer's room locked — the doors bolted from the inside, mind you. The windows barred. The street agog with the news that there had been a murder done.

"Mrs. Maum had heard two shots and come billowing out of the house like a square-rigger with her mouth full of screams. The foul police battered down the wretched door. And there was Meyer, murdered and mutilated, on the floor."

McCarey grew wistful. He lit a cigarette with a great deal of grace. And he stared morosely into the foggy air of the speakeasy, shaking his head and heaving three separate sighs.

"Let me tell you one thing," he said. "I have always looked on Gavin as a man of parts. He may be a rat, but he knows more about the newspaper business in his little finger than all the foul geniuses on Park Row put together. But, despite all this dazzling cunning which I am ready to admit, this Gavin has the heart of a snake. He is a

craven and yellow thing that crawls. That's a very fair picture of the man."

McCarey wagged a wild forefinger under my nose.

"This bulletin of Meyer's death dropped on Gavin's desk was no more than two lines long," he said. "A stupid laundryman done to death in a tenement. One of those dull, poverty-ridden crimes. A bubble coming up from a dismal sewer, revealing for the moment that there is life in those stale waters. That's all the bulletin showed. But not to Monsoor Gavin. Monsoor Gavin called me over and, with that peculiar sneer with which he addresses his betters, pointed at this dull, stupid announcement that some totally unimportant human being named Meyer had been snuffed out in some wretched hovel in Troop Street, and said to me, 'There's something in this. There's more in this than meets the eye.' So much for Monsoor Gavin's cunning."

Again my friend scowled and, ogling the door, drained his foe's lifeblood from his glass.

"Let me tell you another thing," he said, and spat. "Lieutenant Neidlinger of the Harlem police is a bird of a similar ilk. A species of double-dealing, cringing officialdom that I will cool off and lay to rest before yonder sun has set."

McCarey chuckled.

"What did you find when you got to Troop Street?" I asked.

"The usual blather," snarled McCarey. "Lieutenant Neidlinger was all agog when I descended on this tenement. He was hovering about the premises and perspiring like an African bride. I tackled him for the facts about this dull, stupid crime, and he at once unburdened his vulgar heart to me. There was some wretched mystery about the business that filled this pretzel-headed police official full of confusion and alarm.

" 'Item one,' said this peculiar fellow: 'how had the desperado responsible for Meyer's death gained entrance into this laundryman's stronghold? Item two: having gained said entrance and committed the bloody deed, how had the same desperado made his exit, leaving every door bolted on the inside and the windows barred? Item three: the dastardly criminal could have pot-shotted Meyer from the street, but how could he have chopped off his hand without coming inside the room? Item four: *why* had this peculiar assailant removed Meyer's hand and whisked it away?' All these nuances were rattling around inside that vast, empty policeman's skull on this hot night.

" 'There's some mystery here,' he said.

" 'We'll discuss that later,' said I. 'First I want to take a look at this dull corpse of a laundryman'."

McCarey began to weave over the table and turn suddenly from the left to the right as if facing his enemies.

"Who was this Meyer?" I asked again, and more soothingly than ever.

My friend was drifting through mists. Once more I could feel him walking the ways of his secret. He was beyond the prod of questions.

"I knew him at once," said McCarey. "I can tell you so much. I knew him. I took one look and I knew him. And I grabbed this dithering cop and fastened myself like a foul burr to his coat tails.

"I gave him no rest. I heckled and bedeviled him until he was panting like one of those horrible little Pomeranians. I drove him out of his mind. I dragged that dizzy Teuton up and down this Pomander Walk where Meyer had lived. We pumped and blasted and burrowed, but not a ray of light. Nothing! There was less to find out about this strange laundryman than if he had never lived. He was a man with no more substance than a shadow on a screen.

"And all the time this dull fellow, Neidlinger, kept mumbling. 'Why did he bar the windows and bolt the doors for ten years, and how did they get away after killing him?'

" 'Because,' your orator replied, 'he was afraid. Because there was some peculiar nightmare on his heels.' And I kept prodding this foolish bloodhound to redouble his efforts. To no avail."

"But you knew at the time," I said.

"Yes," said my friend and snarled. "Who?"

McCarey stared at me.

In the long pause that followed, it became apparent that what kept my friend silent was neither drink nor reticence but a great desire not to cry. A series of symptoms showed that McCarey was overcoming the womanish crisis that held him spellbound. He brought his glazed eyes slowly back to reality until they encountered his cigarette, which hung in his fingers and trembled.

He then carried his cigarette, which he held like the Prince of Wales, to his mouth and maneuvered it promptly back toward the table.

"We won't go into that now," he said.

I realized that McCarey's great secret was out on its feet but still fighting, and I summoned patience into my voice.

"Did they solve it?" I asked.

"All that I am privileged to tell you," said McCarey, "is yes."

His voice had thickened and grown angrier.

"But that worm of a man, Monsoor Gavin, writhes on the hook of his own cowardice. He refuses to print it. Lieutenant Neidlinger refuses to open his dull mouth. He skulks in the bush. Three dithering cops who know what I know have been transferred and promoted and are full of a craven, selfish silence. You are looking upon a man," McCarey burst out, "who is slowly wilt-

ing under the bludgeonings of a conspiracy greater than St. Bartholomew's Eve."

"How did they solve it?" I asked, closing in on McCarey.

"By following Mrs. Maum," said he. "By shadowing that barely animate and faintly human mass of tissue to an office in Forty-ninth Street."

McCarey communicated with the waiter, ordering more drinks and issuing a confused command that Monsoor Gavin, immediately on his appearance, should be haled before us for summary justice.

"What was she doing in Forty-ninth Street?" I asked.

"Who?" said McCarey.

"La Maum," I said.

"Oh, that foul wench," said McCarey, and spat.

"Yes," I persisted.

"My lips are sealed on that subject," said McCarey. "All I can tell you is that she went to collect the wages of her sin. She journeyed to Forty-ninth Street in quest of her share of the blood money. You see, it was she who had baffled that mastermind, Lieutenant Neidlinger. It was this abnormal trollop that had h'isted her idiot boy in through the transom, barely large enough for a cat to crawl through, to bolt the doors inside after the murderers had left. This weazened stripling had crawled in and out of the transom like some trained lizard."

"Why did she want the doors bolted from the inside?" I asked.

"For no reason," said McCarey. "Just a foolish, silly female ambition to create mystery. She derived some species of deformed pleasure from her son's didos in and out of that transom. But they had nothing to do with the case, *per se*. This dithering pachyderm of a female Macbeth had been hired only to get Meyer to unbolt his doors to the murderers. This she did by cooing outside his portal for an hour."

"Were they caught?" I asked, still closing in.

"No," said McCarey. "A thousand times no! We followed Mrs. Maum into that Forty-ninth Street office, but the dastardly crew we were after was wigwagged by some peculiar outpost, and escaped. Leaving behind" — McCarey's eyes both squinted and his voice harshened — "leaving behind a package in the safe containing Meyer's right hand. It was addressed and ready to be mailed."

"To whom?" I asked.

McCarey was silent.

"To whom?" I persisted.

"To a man named Stalin in Moscow, Russia," he said. "It was being sent him with its fingerprints intact to verify the report already over the cables."

"Who was Meyer?" I asked — and this time with my hand on the McCarey arm.

He was silent again, his eyes glaring. I waited.

"Will you believe me when I tell you?" said McCarey, with a sudden pleading whine, and he pulled his head erect with a lurch. "Or will you join this foul conspiracy against truth and justice led by Monsoor Gavin and his peculiar mermidons? Will you believe me if I tell you I've got all the facts of this fabulous crime?"

"I will," I said.

"This laundryman," said McCarey in a harsh voice, "was the Czar of Russia."

I regarded McCarey calmly.

"Nikolay the Second," he said with dignity, in a sad croak. Then he went on in a mumble: "Escaped from his executioners in Siberia in 1918. Shipped across the world, his royal mind fogged by the tragedy of his murdered kin. But enough of his brain left to know he was hunted and that murder waited for him around every corner on the globe. He drifted into Harlem as a little laundryman with a Jewish name."

McCarey slowly folded up over his fifteenth drink, and allowed his head to hang and his eyes to close.

"The Czar of all the Russias," he whispered.

"You said you knew the minute you saw him," I said.

"Yes."

"How?"

The McCarey heart came charging out of its torpor.

"How did I know?" he said. "Because when I looked down on this dead laundryman I saw a cross in his left hand. A Muscovite cross. And a look on that dead face I'll never forget. It was the look of a noble, gracious, royal soul. There were some people who knew who was on the middle cross on a certain hill called Calvary."

McCarey sneered, his face thrust close to mine. "They could tell by a light that hovered peculiarly in the air. There was a light on this Jew laundryman — this Meyer. This little dead Meyer."

"What did Neidlinger say?" I asked.

But the McCarey was in the mists. Tears were sliding down his agitated cheeks and his head was wagging loosely over the table.

A short, gray-haired man appeared beside him.

He had a red, excited face and a pair of black bristling eyebrows. He began shaking the McCarey shoulder.

"Wake up, you lout!" said this man. "Come on, quit your stalling, you lousy, drunken bum!"

McCarey opened one angry eye.

"Monsoor Gavin" he said, and

tried to rise, "you foul Armenian!"

"Pull yourself together," said Gavin, and stood trembling with an excitement even greater than McCarey's had been.

McCarey slowly opened a second eye, glared, and emitted a carnivorous snarl.

"I'm going to stuff your heart," he said, "like a foul olive."

The fearless Gavin with the red face ignored this promise and hoisted McCarey to his feet. He was pushing at him from behind with eager, almost frantic gestures, and steering him for the door.

"Pull yourself together," he whispered fiercely into the McCarey ear.

"No, I can handle him." He turned to me. "I don't need you."

To McCarey he added, giving that bravo a final shove toward the door: "You're going home and pack. I got it all fixed. The boss has agreed. Do you hear me? Agreed, by God!

"You're leaving in the morning for Moscow."

Next Month

Another DEPARTMENT OF LOST STORIES Masterpiece

TARNHELM, or

The Death of My Uncle Robert

by HUGH WALPOLE

Hugh Walpole, with the publication of "The Silver Mask," rocketed to sudden fame as one of the most talented horror story writers of his generation, a fame that was increased even more with "Kind Lady." The play made from it, became one of Broadway's greatest hits. It is indeed a privilege and a pleasure to present next month another of his famous stories, "Tarnhelm, or The Death of My Uncle Robert." Read it in a well lit room, with plenty company around. It's pretty tough!

SIEGE PERILOUS

They had me cornered and there was no way back. No way? I nodded grimly. It takes two to play a game of life and death. Soon my turn would come.

by EDWARD D. HOCH

I'D BEEN IN Caspia about six months, just long enough to acquire a taste for the black caviar that was served everywhere, but not yet quite long enough to accustom myself to the warm, dry days and cool, clear nights. After a couple years' duty in Latin America, where the heavens were likely to pour forth with rain nearly every afternoon, the near-desert conditions of Caspia were something else again.

That was why I usually tried to get over to the big outdoor swimming pool at the Diplomats' Club at least two or three afternoons a week.

I won't pretend I didn't enjoy the place, especially on those days when Barbara Fellini came to swim. Barbara was the daughter of the Italian ambassador, a lithe and lovely girl who looked just perfect in the pale blue bikini that was her standard summertime costume.

"Harry Ponder!" she greeted me this day, all smiles and sunshine. "Are you back here again?"

"I never left. In July the pool is the only place to live." I left her for a quick splashing swim across its width, just to impress. The pool was almost empty this afternoon, and we had the area pretty much to ourselves.

"Show-off!" she threw up to me as I returned, all dripping, to her side. But she said it with that delightful Italian version of English I was fast coming to love.

"Come on. I'll race you."

"No, thanks. Rub my back with some suntan oil."

I dropped to my knees beside her and obeyed. Her skin was soft and smooth and quite delightful. She'd told me once that her mother had been British, and it seemed she'd inherited the best of both parents.

"Ah, Barbara," I breathed.

"Cool it, boy! Tell me about life at the American embassy."

"It's all code books and weather maps, and economic projections."

I was nominally in charge of communications at the embassy, a position which left me with a good deal of freedom to move about. I was sure even Barbara didn't suspect my true involvement with one of those shadowy Washington agencies the newspapers were always talking about.

"You make it sound so dull."

"It is dull. This is the only excitement I get."

She sat up suddenly and slipped off her dark glasses, revealing the flashing gray-brown eyes that had enchanted me on our first meeting.

"I've changed my mind," she said. "Let's race."

She was two steps ahead of me going into the water, and she was a strong swimmer even without the advantage. By the time I reached the other end and reached up to pull my dripping body out of the water, I could already hear her laughter above me.

"You must have more practice, dear Harry!" she said.

"Let's try again," I gasped, blinking my eyes to clear them of the water. That was when Barbara screamed.

I looked up and saw a bearded man in dirty fatigues and combat boots standing at the edge of the pool, pointing a Sten gun at my bare stomach.

"You are Harry Ponder," he said in broken English. "You are our prisoner. You come or you are dead man!"

CASPIA IS A little country as countries go, situated between Russia and the Arab states and acting as something of a social buffer between them. It is a country mainly of fishermen and — surprisingly — seal hunters who prowl the great landlocked Caspian Sea in search of their harvest. The black caviar and the salt which they gather from these same waters seem to link the people with Russia to the north, and yet for many of them their climate

and way of life are more closely allied with the Arab nations to the south and west.

I had been sent to Caspia six months earlier because its government had become something of a pawn in the Middle East struggle. The immediate cause of the trouble was a dissident group of rebels who'd turned to acts of terrorism when the government banned their meetings, closed their shops, and imprisoned their leaders.

The Russians had already offered their support to the rebels, both secretly and publicly, and there was a growing fear in Washington that further repression by the Caspian government would force the rebels into the Russian camp and change the entire power structure of the region. Certainly a Communist-dominated minority in Caspia would, at the very least, strengthen the Russians' hand with the Arab nations. And eventually the government of Caspia might be forced into an accommodation with Moscow.

My job in Caspia was to make contact with the rebels, to learn their situation and even to promise them some form of secret American support if it was necessary to lure them from the Communist camp. In six months I'd been an utter failure. Now, suddenly, it looked very much as if I'd succeeded.

The bearded man with the Sten gun held it steady at my bare stomach while a second man appeared from somewhere to tie my dripping hands behind me.

"You come with us," the first man repeated.

"At least let me get some clothes on!"

"No time for that. Come on!" The second man shoved me forward while the gunman turned briefly toward Barbara.

"Tell them — tell them to release Kashan and Yazd and Shir-Astara by midnight or he dies. Midnight! Or we deliver his head to the American embassy!"

They hustled me out the gate to a waiting car, avoiding the route through the club. "Onto the floor, dog!" the man with the gun commanded. He poked my ribs with its cold barrel. I obeyed in silence and the car drove off immediately.

During the drive I had plenty of time to consider my situation. Of course, I knew about diplomats and embassy personnel being kidnaped in various Latin American countries during the past two years.

But to my knowledge it was the first time such a thing had happened in Caspia. The men with the guns meant business. I had no doubt of that.

I tried to decide in my own mind what the chances were of the government releasing Kashan, Yazd, and Shir-Astara as demanded, and decided they were pretty slim unless the United States exerted a great deal of pressure on my behalf.

The three were the arrested leaders of the rebel terrorists, dangerous men awaiting execution. Just then, I would not have bet on the chances of saving my head.

"Soon now," the man with the gun said, nudging me in the bare ribs.

He'd known my name back at the pool, and I could only suppose that the whole thing had been carefully planned. Had they chosen me simply because I was an American, or did they know my secret mission to Caspia?

The car bumped over some railroad track and continued down a dirt road. I know by this time that we were out of the city, heading most probably for one of the deserted shacks down by the water where the salt workers lived in season.

I'd always considered it the most logical area for a rebel hideout, and I'd spent more than one day down there myself, trying to find some clue to them.

When finally the car stopped and the men pulled me out of the back seat, I saw that I was right. We were only some hundred yards from the water, parked in among the tin-roofed wooden shacks of the drying area.

Here, each autumn, the harvesters lived while they gathered in the shore salt from which the water had evaporated. It was a task which sometimes took several weeks, performed with primitive tools against the harsh landscape of the sea, the shoreline, and the distant mountains.

I had not been blindfolded nor gagged, though my hands were still tied behind my back. This told me a good deal about my situation. It meant, first of all, that there was no one near enough to hear my shouts. And it meant also that this was only a temporary hideout for the rebels, one it did no harm to show me.

It also might mean that they had already decided to kill me, whatever the outcome of the negotiations with the government. I was not yet willing to accept that possibility.

Inside the shack another man waited. He was bearded like the gunman, but appeared much younger. He looked me up and down and then, removing the thin twisted cigar from between his lips, said, "Get him some clothes. We have an extra pair of fatigues that should fit. And some shoes, if we have any."

The clothes they produced were itchy and uncomfortable against my skin, but I was thankful for them

nevertheless. The shoes were low canvas ones such as the fishermen sometimes wore, a size too large, but wearable nonetheless. When I'd finished dressing they retied my hands and the bearded man with the cigar sat down at a table opposite me.

"Welcome, Harry Ponder. I am sorry we must meet under these circumstances." His English was better than the gunman's, sounding a bit like the British-educated Indian's modulated accents.

"So am I," I told him. "How long do you intend to keep me here?"

The man shrugged. "You should be free by midnight, if the government cooperates."

"And if they don't?"

He smiled slightly. "You have nothing to fear as yet. We have no desire to antagonize the United States government." Yet despite his reassuring words there was something in his deep brown eyes I didn't like.

I took a wild guess and asked, "You wouldn't be Hamadan by any chance, would you?" Hamadan was an ex-army officer and youthful rebel who'd assumed command of the anti-government forces following the arrest of the three leaders. To the peasants and villagers of Caspia he was already something of a legend.

"I am Hamadan. Why do you ask?"

I studied the deep brown eyes again, with new respect. "It's just that I've been trying to contact you for six months now. I'm glad you've finally come out of hiding."

He chuckled a little. "But I am still in hiding, Mr. Ponder. It is you who have joined me here."

"My government is anxious to learn the situation with the rebels."

His anger flared for a moment. "You learn nothing here! You are my prisoner! By midnight you will be a dead man!"

I tried to keep my voice calm and reasoning. "Perhaps, but that won't endear you to my government. They'll take it as your answer to their offer."

"Offer?" The word had caught him, like a well-baited fishhook.

"I could talk a lot better if my hands were untied."

He smiled and picked up his twisted cigar, carefully knocking an ash from its end. "Very well. But I must warn you that any attempt to escape will be dealt with most harshly. This shack is surrounded by my men."

Someone, probably the man with the Sten gun, stepped behind me and slashed my bonds with a single cut. It felt good to have my hands free, and for a moment I could kid myself into thinking I was safe now.

"Thanks," I said.

"Now about the offer you mention." He twisted the thin cigar between his fingers. "Is it an offer of money? Of arms?"

"You're going a bit too fast for me. Certainly I could not promise

guns or money to be used against the legitimate government of Caspia."

"The Russians have promised us."

"Just how deeply are you committed to the Russians, Hamadan?"

He smiled, revealing a glistening golden tooth. "To answer that I must tell you something of our country of Caspia. Legend has it that one seat on the grand ruling council must be kept open, awaiting some great warrior who will ride down from the north to guide our people in the cause of righteousness.

"The legend is many centuries old, but it is still honored by our rulers. A vacant chair is left at each council meeting for this purpose. Legend further states that any pretender claiming the seat would be put to death."

I nodded. "It seems I heard something about the legend once from Barbara Fellini, at the Italian embassy. It's not an unusual legend, by the way. It resembles in fact the Siege Perilous found in King Arthur. I believe in Arthurian legend a seat at the Round Table was reserved for the finder of the Holy Grail, and was fatal to pretenders."

"I do not know of your King Arthur," Hamadan answered. "I only know of Caspia."

"Weren't you educated by the British?"

"Long ago. That was long ago. I tell you this legend now because these three men — Kashan, Yazd, and Shir-Astara — all came from the north in recent years to lead our nation on its predestined path."

"To the north is Russia."

Hamadan shrugged his shoulders. "I do not write legends nor draw maps. I only tell you what I know. Three men from the north, each wanting to occupy the legendary seat of power. When the government rejected them, they joined forces in the rebellion and the acts of terrorism. That was when they were arrested and sentenced to die."

"And you?"

"I am young enough, and unwise enough perhaps, to believe the legend. I think a man from the north will come to lead our nation, if not now, then some day. The possibility exists that one of these three is the man, and so I have undertaken to rescue all three."

"The possibility exists that one of them works for the Russians, too."

"I know that. I am sure of it, in fact. But I cannot let them die. The three must live, so that one may fulfill his destiny, even if another of them delivers us into the hands of the Russians."

"One of the three has offered you Russian arms?"

"He said he could obtain them for us."

"Which one?"

But Hamadan shook his head and got to his feet, stubbing out the thin cigar. "I have talked too long al-

ready. Rest, my friend, and pray to your God that the three are released by midnight."

Then he was gone, and I was alone in the shack.

THE AFTERNOON drifted almost imperceptibly into evening, in the manner of the days in Caspia. I watched the guards for a time, smoking and laughing over some obscene stories I only half understood. Then I turned my attention to the cabin's interior, studying the tin roof and wooden walls, searching for some weapon I might use if and when that time came. I still did not think they would dare to kill me, and the fear of death had not yet settled in my gut.

Hamadan returned to the shack after dark, a little before ten o'clock. He was disturbed and angry, and he seemed ready to vent his wrath on me. "Those damned fools! They have rejected my demands! They dare to sit in their palace and sneer at me. They will learn their mistake when I deliver your head, Harry Ponder."

"The mistake would be all yours then." For the first time I was really concerned. He was no longer the friendly conspirator with whom one could reason. And in the doorway, the bearded guard with the Sten gun was all too ready.

"You have two hours to live," Hamadan snarled. "Two hours, unless they release all three."

"I could be more valuable to you alive."

"We have already spoken of that."

"If you kill me they will surely die."

"They are sentenced to die anyway."

"But you know the government will never carry out the execution threat. When she told me of the legend, Barbara Fellini said they wouldn't dare execute a claimant to the empty chair — not unless such a person was proven to be a foreign agent. Now you admit that one of the three is a Communist attempting to overthrow the government, but you don't say which one it is."

"If I told you, and you left this

place alive, you could cause the man's execution."

I knew very little about the three imprisoned men. Kashan was a teacher, highly respected by the young people of the country, and Yazd was a doctor who'd practiced medicine in rural areas before his call to rebellion. About Shir-Astara I knew nothing. He was only a name in the newspapers. For all I knew, any or all of them could be in the pay of the Russians.

"Who is the real leader of the rebels, Hamadan?"

"I am the leader until one of the three asserts himself. According to the legend, the one who survives and overcomes the obstacles will occupy the council chair."

"If your present government lets him."

"But that is the purpose of our rebellion. The government must allow the seating of our true leader." He nodded, as if reassuring himself. "And then the rebels will become part of a greater Caspian government."

"It'll never happen if you kill me."

He glanced at his watch. "They still have two hours to save you."

And so what might have been the final two hours of my life began. Hamadan left me once more, but now the bearded man with the Sten gun entered the shack and sat across the table from me. There was only a single lantern to light the interior, and they must have feared I might smash it and attempt an escape in the darkness.

The guard had a portable radio with him, and at eleven oclock he tuned it to the English-language news. I had the distinctly unpleasant experience of hearing my name as the night's top news. It was almost like reading one's own obituary.

"American embassy official Harry Ponder remains in rebel hands at this hour tonight, following his spectacular kidnaping at gunpoint from the swimming pool at the Diplomats' Club this afternoon. The rebels are demanding the release of their three imprisoned leaders by midnight, or they threaten to kill Ponder. Thus far the government has refused to grant the rebels' demands that the three prisoners be placed aboard the midnight plane to Istanbul and granted safe passage out of the country."

The announcer concluded his newscast with the observation, *"The three rebel leaders have been imprisoned for the past seven months. Harry Ponder has been a prisoner for seven hours. Tonight, the future of all four is very much in doubt."*

"That's encouraging," I mumbled.

The guard laughed. "They will not let you die."

"I hope to hell not!"

Because no man accepts the threat of death passively, I began examining the interior of the shack again for a means of escape. There was

a little workbench in one corner with some wires and what looked like an altimeter on it, but otherwise the place was nearly bare.

I could distract the guard's attention long enough to smash the lantern and plunge the room into darkness, but he would only react by spraying the place with bullets from his Sten gun, and only stupid luck would save me then.

At 11:30 Hamadan returned. The radio was still on, playing a selection of Indian sitar music. There had been no further news bulletins.

"Your time grows short," the rebel leader observed.

"You won't kill me," I said. I'd tried everything else, so I might as well try this.

"No? And why not?"

"Because it might anger the government enough to speed up the executions. Besides, if they are released later, you'll need me alive to deal with them. Our ambassador can't negotiate with rebels."

"If we don't deal with the Americans, we will surely deal with the Russians."

"Nuts! The Russians only want to get their man into that empty council seat. Then the rebels and their cause will be forgotten."

"Not true," he said.

"Which of the three is the Communist? Shir-Astara?"

Hamadan grinned, showing again the tooth of gold. "Why do you suspect him?"

"Because I know nothing of him. The others are a teacher and a doctor."

"A teacher or a doctor cannot be in the pay of the Russians?"

"Yes, but Shir-Astara seems likelier."

"He is a Muslim holy man, much honored among his own people to the north."

"There are no Muslims to the north."

Hamadan shrugged. "One of the mysteries of the religion, I suppose." He was smiling.

"What have the Russians given you so far, besides trouble?"

The smile disappeared. "In March a Russian general met with their man — Shir-Astara, if you insist — on the shores of the Caspian Sea. He delivered into his hands fifty pounds of sulphur, one hundred pounds of potassium nitrate, a quantity of primer fuse, batteries, and clockwork mechanisms. Enough to make several large bombs."

"I see."

Hamadan sighed and motioned to the bearded guard.

"We have talked enough. The prisoners have not been released. I am sorry to have to do this, but it must be."

"At least give me till midnight. That's twenty minutes yet!"

"The radio would have announced their decision by now, if our leaders were to be freed.

I was facing toward him, with the door at my back, and I had only his

sudden startled expression to tell me something unexpected had happened.

"What are you doing here?" he gasped.

I turned and saw Barbara Fellini standing in the doorway, wearing a black jumpsuit and boots. In that instant she had never looked more beautiful to me. She held a Beretta Brigadier Luger in each hand.

BARBARA FELLINI said, tossing one of the guns to me, "Here! I've got a car up the road."

Hamadan and the guard were frozen in their tracks, uncertain whether to challenge her. Finally Hamadan came to life. "You'll never reach that car. The guards will kill you both as soon as I give the word."

I took the Sten gun from the bearded man who'd been my original kidnaper and motioned the two of them against the wall. Then I moved over to join Barbara at the door.

"What about it?" I asked. "Can we get through the guards?"

"We can if we take him with us," she said, pointing her gun at Hamadan's stomach.

"Why are you doing this?" he asked.

There was something in Hamadan's tone of voice, something that had been there too when he asked what she was doing there. I remembered how they'd grabbed me at the pool, knowing right where I'd be; remembered Barbara there, screaming but not really interfering. And she'd found this place. Found it and passed unhurt through the ring of guards.

Because they knew her.

"You set me up for this," I told her, hardly able to believe it. "You're in with Hamadan and the rebels."

"He told me you wouldn't be hurt. He said the government would release the prisoners. But now it's midnight and they haven't and I was afraid of what he might do to you."

"Thanks, I guess." I was anxious to get away from this place. "Let's get out of here before — "

But Hamadan was holding up his hands. "Listen!"

The music had suddenly stopped on the radio, replaced by the harsh voice of the announcer. " . . . *government of Caspia has announced it is agreeing to the rebels' demands for the release of three imprisoned leaders. A spokesman stated that Shir-Astara, Kashan, and Yazd will be placed on the midnight plane to Istanbul as instructed by the kidnapers. It is expected that the American, Harry Ponder, will be released shortly.*"

Barbara Fellini lowered her gun. "We've won, Hamadan! We've won!"

He grinned broadly. "It would seem so. This calls for wine all around."

But I was not about to lower my weapon.

"I'll feel better when I'm away from here," I said. "Back at the American embassy."

I did toss the Sten gun on the table, though, as a gesture of peace. The Beretta stayed where it was, pointed at the wall about halfway between Hamadan and the guard.

"We will take you back," Hamadan said. "Barbara will drive you. We are friends again now, no?"

"You were going to kill me ten minutes ago," I reminded him.

"All for the cause." He turned to the guard. "Petro, bring us a bottle of the finest wine."

The man nodded and disappeared out the door. I glanced at my watch. It was eleven minutes before midnight.

Barbara came over to me. "Will you ever forgive me, Harry?"

"I'll think about it." More than her working with the rebels, it was her obvious intimacy with Hamadan that bugged me. And yet, she had come to rescue me. I couldn't forget that.

The guard, Petro, returned with a bottle of Syrian palm wine. It was not exactly what I'd expected, but under the circumstances it didn't taste half bad.

It was exactly midnight as we clustered around the radio and though I still held the Luger, I no longer looked on us as captive and captors. Hamadan had treated me well, and I'd had my first good contact with the rebels I'd been seeking.

Sitting at the table over the glass of palm wine, I tried to press my advantage. "Hamadan, those three prisoners will be flying away to their freedom in a few minutes. Which of them is the Communist agent? Is it Shir-Astara?"

He grinned and took out another cigar. "What does it matter now?"

"It matters because these three will obviously be back, probably within a day, to lead the rebels once more. If a way could be found to exclude the Communist member of the triumvirate, with you yourself taking his place, I think the whole rebel cause would be greeted more favorably in Washington."

"That is worth considering," he admitted, but there was something in his tone of voice that told me he would not consider it. His ears were glued to the little radio, where they were announcing now that a car carrying the three rebel leaders had arrived at the airport. It was five past twelve, and they were holding the flight for the late arrivals.

I finished my wine and walked over to look again at the gadget I'd noticed earlier. It was indeed some sort of airplane altimeter, apparently new with wires attached. Something stirred in the back of my mind . . .

"The plane's taking off!" Barbara shouted from the table by the radio. "They're free!"

I whirled around, facing Ham-

adan. "We've got to stop them. There's a bomb on that plane!"

"What?" Barbara looked blank, not understanding my words, but Hamadan understood all too well. He grabbed for the Sten gun on the table bringing it up fast.

I raised the Luger and shot him in the shoulder.

Covering the wounded Hamadan and Petro, I spoke very quickly to Barbara. "How can we reach the airport?"

"I have my father's embassy car. It has a telephone in it."

"Thank God! Get on the phone and tell them to bring back that plane. Tell them there's a bomb aboard attached to an altimeter. When the plane reaches a certain altitude it'll explode."

I leveled the gun at Hamadan. "What's it set for?" He spat at the floor and I put a second bullet into the wall by his head. "I asked, what's it set for?"

"Ten thousand feet. You're probably too late already."

But Barbara was already running out the door, heading for the road where she'd parked her father's car. I circled to the window where I could watch her dark form slipping between the trees and be certain no guard intercepted her.

"No fast moves," I warned Hamadan and the guard, "or you're dead men."

"How did you know about the bomb?" he asked, still clutching his bleeding shoulder.

"The extra altimeter here gave it away. And these wires. It might have been for a private plane, but I knew that it could be attached to a bomb too. It's much more certain than a timing device if there's a chance the plane's takeoff might be delayed. I remembered your telling me about the Russians supplying the material for explosives, and the thing just fell together."

"But why would I rescue them from a death sentence only to blow them up?"

"That was the part that stumped me for a minute. But in truth you rescued them because they would not be executed. Barbara told me the government wouldn't dare to execute a possible claimant to the council chair, and she must have told you the same thing. So the only way you could be certain they'd die was to rescue them from prison and kill them yourself.

"Actually, you had nothing to lose. If the three weren't released tonight, you could kill me and possibly infuriate the government so much they'd carry out the delayed executions after all. And even the bombing of the plane would be blamed on the government — certainly not on you."

"And why would I want them dead?"

"Because none of the three is a the Communist agent, Hamadan. You are the agent. You are the one who met with the Russian general

and received the material for the explosives."

"You know this?" he asked, his composure crumbling now.

"I know it. This is July, and you said the meeting took place in March, four months ago. You said the agent was one of those three, but that would have been impossible. The radio told us they'd all been imprisoned for the past seven months, so none of them could have met the Russian in March. Only you could have done it, Hamadan. And only you could have constructed the carefully designed bomb and paid someone to place it aboard the midnight flight."

"You are a wise man for an American," he said. "Perhaps a deal is still possible."

"No deals."

Barbara Fellini came back then, out of breath from running. "They have ordered the plane back. It's all right. And the police are on their way here."

"Good," I told her. My work was done for the moment. There was still the problem of the three rebel leaders and the empty council chair, but I knew these things had a way of working themselves out.

As for me, I only wanted to finish my swim at the club pool and perhaps talk things out with Barbara. Then tomorrow would take care of itself.

In the Next Issue—

MURDER ON LAZY RIVER

A Thrilling New JOHNNY HAWK Novelet

by EDWARD Y. BREESE

The River of Death, men called it, that murkey stream which harbored deadly reptiles and far more deadly men. Hidden trails there met and—crossed, trails that could bring a man to sudden gold or sudden feasome murder. Don't fail to read this powerful new novelet headling Johnny Hawk in one of his greatest roles!

THE ABRAXAS AFFAIR

AN EXCITING NOVELET OF UNBEARABLE SUSPENSE

by JERRY JACOBSON

Greed? . . . lust? . . . insane jealousy? Who had killed little Lonny? Only a crumpled body knew—and he would never, never tell. . .

THOUGH HE HAD never before seen one in the iron-and-stone, Lieutenant Cleveland Bull had a pretty good vision of what Bannon School would have to offer to the eye. Iron fencing and high double gates and a high-nosed gate guard authorized not to let anybody through until a blood test was taken and it turned out blue. A brooding compound of stone buildings. Identically uniformed students with undeveloped juvenile bodies and highly developed adult minds. Willow trees everywhere, All kinds of bronzed heroes rearing on bronzed horses.

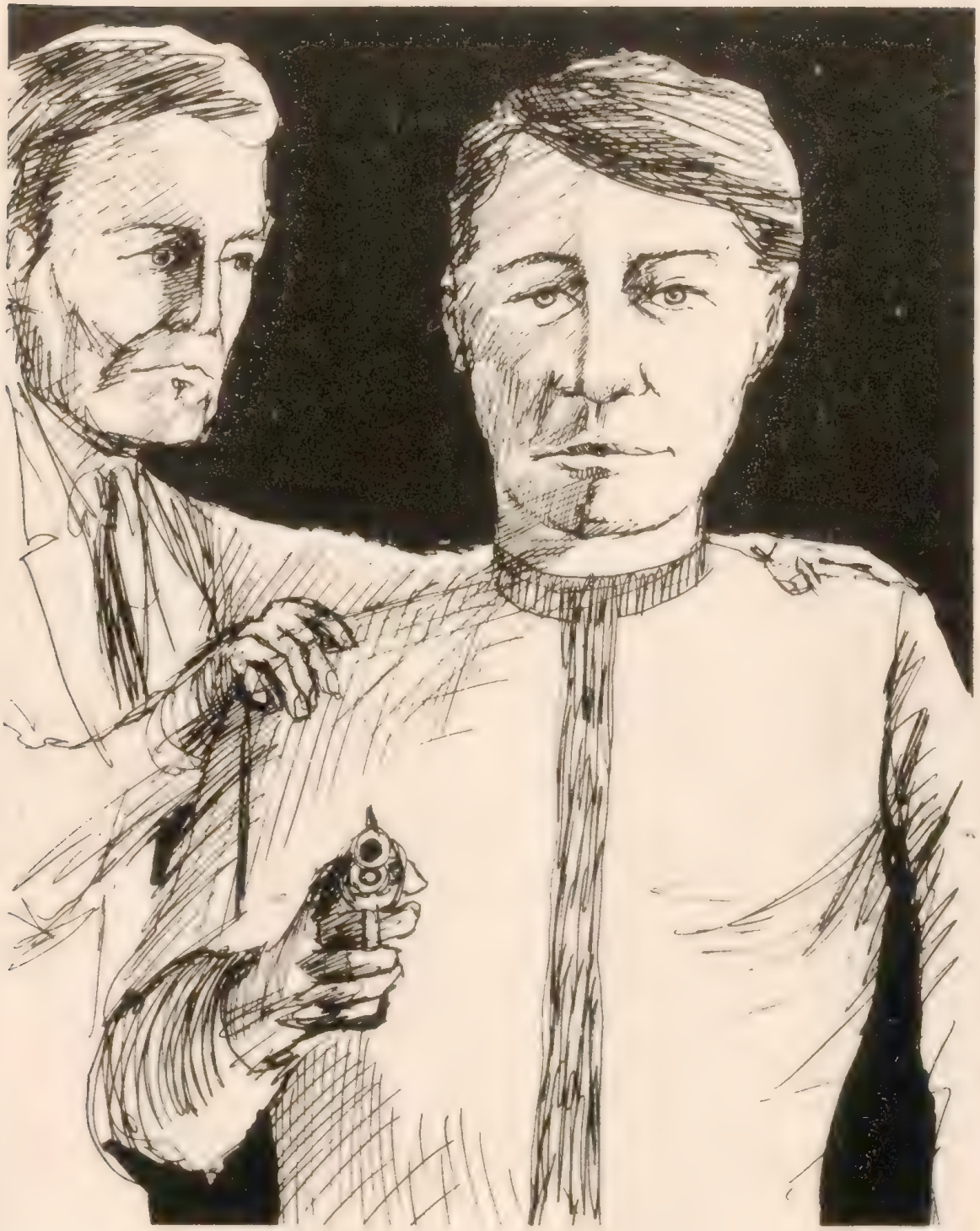
At Bannon's front gate he wasn't disappointed in his imagination. The gate guard had an expression that looked chipped out of stone. After the proper identification, he presented Bull with a ledger, which he had to sign, a clear-plastic card reading VISITOR — which Bull propped inside his windshield—and a hand-drawn, mimeographed map, with a bold X marked over one of the buildings.

"This is where you want to go, Lieutenant. Savory Hall, on Quadrangle Drive. Headmaster Lauderback's offices. He's expecting you. Got an ambulance coming for the body?"

"Be along in a minute," Bull said. "Send the driver in a back way, will

STARRING

LIEUTENANT CLEVELAND BULL



you? I don't want these kids frightened any more than necessary"

The guard tossed Bull a wry smile. "Lieutenant?" he said, "These kids don't frighten."

A short jog of highway and then Bull was on Quadrangle Drive. He had been right, stone buildings everywhere. SCIENCE HALL, AVORY BENSON MATHEMATICS HALL. Nothing about the rain-swept, winter gray scene bid him welcome.

Savory Hall was a three-story affair with a belfry and a Roman numeraled clock stuck in its belly half way up. Bull marked the time: 8:10 a.m., one hour and ten minutes beyond the time Lonnie Dravis' body had been discovered.

Bull drew his car up to the curb in front of Savory Hall and got out in a driving rain. A man stood waiting for him at the tip of the stairs, his suit-coat unbuttoned, the white shirt beneath dotted with raindrops. *Not afraid of a little foul weather,* thought Bull to himself. *Or a little darkening in the human environment. Good sign.*

"Lieutenant Bull," the man said in a husky tone. "I'm Headmaster Lauderback. Rain's killing. Let's go have a look at the body."

"You don't waste any time," Bull said.

"We fill a day, Lieutenant," the headmaster said, tersely. "We fill a day."

With Bull following, Headmaster Lauderback led him down Savory Hall's stairs at a brisk pace, then down a brick footpath which took them behind the hall.

"I haven't any of the particulars yet," Bull said, withdrawing a red spiral notepad from inside his jacket. "I was pulled off another case less than an hour ago."

"You made good time, then," said the headmaster. "Shoot."

"The boy's full name?"

"Lonell Vincent Dravis. Pardon me for saying so, but his death appears to be an accident. I've already had a look at the body. It's positioned directly beneath the window of his dormitory room."

"What makes you think he wasn't pushed or didn't jump?" Bull asked.

"Two things. First, there is a coathanger draped with two clean T-shirts laying next to the body. And second, there was no rain last night. Just from the look of things, I'd say young Dravis had washed out some clothes last night, draped them out to dry over a few coathangers and fell while trying to retrieve them."

"This morning?"

"Or last night. Whenever the rain started pumping down."

"I'll wait for a look at things before I concur with that," said Bull.

"And you'll probably see something I didn't," said the headmaster. "That the way it usually goes, I guess."

Behind Savory Hall the scene changed from the restrictiveness of

walks and buildings to the freedom of open, grassy areas. Out on a vast field faintly lined for football or soccer, perfect rectangles of students were practicing drill work, their precise steps raising a fine mist from the rain-slogged turf. Lauderback lifted a hand and pointed it toward a cluster of three tall buildings of stone.

"The dorms. From left to right —Hadley, Dravis, Collino," the headmaster pointed out.

"Dravis," repeated Bull. "The name of the dead boy."

"Grandfather," said the headmaster tersely. "A big bequeathment built that and a science lab."

"Rich and lineaged family," said Bull.

"If the Dravis' had a mind to, they could purchase Massachusetts, lock, stock and Boston."

"What year was young Dravis in school?" Bull asked, as he jotted while he walked.

"An Old Boy," said the headmaster, "A twelfth grader. New Boys are seventh graders, Second Year Boys the eighth and so on through the twelfth. You'll note the first and last years here at Bannon are awarded special significance. New Boy for the painless forms of servitude, Old Boy for the privilege of achievement."

"The former gets the short end of the stick and the latter gets to wield it," said Bull.

"All things accrue to those with tenure," Lauderback said.

"How about Lonnie Dravis the student?"

"One of our best. His marks have never been in trouble. Lieutenant, we have an Honor Roll Plaque hung in the first floor lobby of Savory Hall. On it are inscribed the names of the top one hundred scholars at Bannon since its accreditation in 1891. Lonnie's grandfather, father and older brother are highly noted, as will be the name of Lonnie Dravis—with special significance. He is the first student at Bannon to die while taking studies."

"And disciplinary marks against his record?" Bull thought to ask.

"None but the usual amount of prankishness. They all try a hand at beating the system once or twice while they're here. They wouldn't be normal, growing boys if they didn't. I think he was caught once trying to bring a couple of bottles of wine into the dorms. The result of a midnight shopping trip to Bannon Corner."

"Bannon Corner?"

"You passed it driving up. Just a small corner of commerce serving fishermen and hunters and limestone miners and the workmen at the processing plant five miles north. Our boys take a short slide down a muddy hill about midnight, pay a couple of bucks more then the normal traffic bears and bring it back up the hill."

"You let them get away with that?" Bull asked.

"We let them do a little growing

up, but we don't make it a stroll through the park, Lieutenant. We have dorm orderlies on duty until morning. And all the doors are locked and chained at ten o'clock. The D.O. makes a tour of the grounds around the dormitories at intervals of his own choosing, after he locks up at the midnight curfew. Fear of the unknown keeps their peccadillos at a tolerable level."

"Controlled evil," said Bull. "With heavy reprisals for the slow-witted."

"That's about it, Lieutenant. And we have the other normal enticement, Miss Prymms' School. They take their chances after curfew there, too."

For Bull's perfect attention he had been rewarded with a good mental picture of Bannon School and the surrounding facilities with which it interacted.

Bull now was faced with the inevitable interaction; the interaction with the corpse. It appeared as a simple, forlorn lump beneath a gray, wool blanket, monogrammed with a red Block-B. Another of Bannon's granitized guards stood over it in a stiffened death watch. Rain drops dripping from his nose and chin went unblotted.

When Lauderback made a slight motion, the guard nodded, stopped and pulled back the blanket. Lonnie Dravis was on his chest, with his arms flung above his head. His right hand was clutching the swan-shaped neck of a wire coathanger still draped with wet-wash. With a hand Bull made a tour up the boy's spine. What he suspected was confirmed when he reached the base of the neck. It had been snapped clean.

"The window in line with the body was young Dravis' room," said Lauderback. "The sixth floor, the window where the laundry is still hanging."

Bull turned and glanced up the side of the gray stone dormitory. Clothing still flapped heavily in a half dozen other windows, including Dravis'. Double, push-out windows, hinting at a certain similiarity. But what? Yes. All the windows pushed open from the right; each left window was a stationary pane of glass.

"Still think he fell," Bull said to Lauderback flatly.

"I don't see anything to suggest that he didn't, Lieutenant. Do you?"

"Possibly," Bull said.

The coroner's ambulance appeared silently and suddenly from up an access road between Hadley and Dravis dorms. It was not just a dead boy the attendants efficiently loaded now. It was a murdered one.

"Mind if we go up for a look at the boy's room?" Bull said to Lauderback.

"You detectives delight in making suspense out of everything. You going to tell me now or next week?"

"I'm going to show you," Bull said. "Upstairs."

Lonnie Dravis' room—601—was inspection spotless. The two bunks

set along either wall were tightly fitted with gray wool blankets and dust covers. The two study desks, neatly lined with books, were clean and uncluttered. The two portable closets of wood displayed regimental and civilian clothing in impeccable order. And the wine-tiled floor was polished to such a lustre, Bull could pick out his own image in it up to his knees. Two beds, two desks, two closets. Ordered symmetry. Only a single discrepancy spoiled the military perfection: the dangling laundry Lonnie Dravis had not been able to retrieve.

"Who was Lonnie Dravis' roommate?" Bull asked, putting off for a moment, his hunch about murder.

"His name is Burke Hamilton," said Lauderback. He moved to one of the bunks and checked a small metal tag fixed to its end to make sure. "Yes—Hamilton."

"In class?"

"In Springfield, Massachusetts, across state. We sent him home three days ago to attend a family funeral. Second Year Boy. Lieutenant? What about this business of young Dravis not falling by accident?"

"Let's pretend for the moment you're Lonnie Dravis," Bull said. "You've put out your laundry sometime during the evening and suddenly, up comes what may be a pretty long, heavy rainstorm. What do you do?"

"Simple," said the headmaster. "I take in my wet wash and drape

it over the towel rods in the bathroom. Or the back of a chair. Any place in out of the weather."

"Do it for me," Bull said. "With the rest of the laundry hanging in the window."

"Now?"

"Now."

For a moment Lauderback hesitated on the rim of action. He was used to trick and pranks and perhaps he expected one here. Then he shrugged mildly and walked to the window, closed to just a fraction of an inch to pinch the coathanger necks against the molding. With the palm of his right hand he pushed open the swing window and started to reach around it with his left to bring in the wet wash.

"No," said Bull. "Use your right hand. The one Lonnie Dravis used."

Lauderback saw the impossibility of such a thing immediately. "Only two people can bring in their laundry that way," he said. "PlasticMan and Wilt Chamberlain. All right, so the coathanger was found clutched in Dravis' right hand, which means he hadn't been in the act of re-

trieving his laundry. He jumped, or was pushed."

"Jumped? What's he pausing to take a clean but soggy set of underclothes? To wear in the hereafter?"

Lauderback took a seat on one of the beds. The look he gave Bull had murder written all through it. "We've got a killer on campus. My day is made, Lieutenant."

"It isn't as hopeless as all that," Bull told him. "First, he's a captive killer, one whose escape would substantiate his guilt. And second, his whereabouts are known every minute of the day. It's a public record and he's there for the plucking—out of the classroom, off the quadrangle—right under our noses."

"Fine," said Lauderback. "But who to pluck? One good thing; at least he's not aware anyone is on to him yet."

"He will be, though, the minute I begin nosing around," Bull said. "He'll make an error, speak an unguarded word. We'll get him."

"Lieutenant," droned Lauderback, derision humming in his voice. "No physical clues, no witnesses, no suspects. That's like hitting against Tom Seaver without a bat."

Bull not only had to agree it was a tough nut to crack, it looked now to be encased in steel. Two hundred and thirty student suspects, all looking like new, polished apples. But inside one, there was an imperfection, a core beginning to rot, a worm wriggling with life. And worms only poked their heads from apples in comic strips.

Lauderback looked at his watch. "I've got to get back to the wheelhouse of the ship," he said to Bull. "I'm at your disposal. I'll be in my office until two o'clock. Then, I've got a meeting in Boston with some alumni, but I should be back by seven o'clock tonight. Phone in a little alcove midway down the hall outside. Extension 200 is my office. For outside, just dial 9."

Lauderback went to the door and turned. "Where do you intend to start finding this killer, Lieutenant?"

"The textbook says the scene of the crime," Bull said, spreading his arms.

"Well, welcome to the scene of the crime," Lauderback said somewhat ironically, as he left.

Bull, now alone in the nearly antiseptic room, felt the alienation growing, his solidarity turn complete. Still, the room itself was not a complete enemy. In it were bits and pieces of two personalities. A bit of wallboard, tacked and pasted with pennants, momentoes, photographs, ticket stubs, labels from beer and wine bottles. Clothing, desks full of papers, notes, scraps of personality.

Bull strolled over to the desks and scanned the titles of the books set in library neatness, Burke Hamilton's on the left and Lonnie Dravis' on the right. Both contained the normal number of textbooks: biology, beginning chemistry (on Burke

Hamilton's), advanced mathematics and advanced chemistry (on Lonnie Dravis').

And Bull spotted the expected assortment of reference books — Theasaurus', dictionaries, Atlases, the dead weight of first-year language texts and introductory courses in political science and philosophy, their bindings stringy and broken in worn evidence against old victories over learning.

But Bull was more curious about the off-hours literature, the kind of reading a young boy is drawn to out of inclination and private impulse after school is let out.

The titles on Burke Hamilton's desk were not especially revealing or shocking. Two spy novels by Ian Fleming. Melville. Thomas Wolfe. Cervantes. All of it was above average reading material for a boy of thirteen, but nothing to suggest abnormality.

There was, however, something curious about the leisure literature belonging to Lonnie Dravis. Most of it was a duplication of the kind of books Burke Hamilton read, but three were conspicuous for their foreignness. One was by Albert Camus, titled *The Stranger;* the other two by Hermann Hesse — *Steppenwolf* and *Demian.*

Bull pulled them out and spent a half hour skimming them. They were intellectual, Freudian, mystic. Beautiful and terrifying. Pleasurable and painful. Unifying and alienating. It all rose the puzzling question in Bull's mind. Why would a young boy like Lonnie Dravis, who was so deeply involved with life's certainties (mathematics, chemistry, his probably later successes at M.I.T. and Dow Chemical), be drawn toward life's uncertainties (mysticism, alienation, the dark convolutions of the human mind)?

Out in the hallway alcove, Bull got on the phone to Headmaster Lauderback and received his permission for a dormitory master key with which to make a check of the rooms in all three dorms. Lauderback consented, making a mild aspersion to the effect that Bull was chasing out after wild geese. To which Bull apologized, explaining that at the present they were the only geese on the horizon.

His check took a full two hours. Each door he opened gave him the feeling he would uncover what he sought and each door he closed only mocked him for his blind allegiance to hope. The books he was after didn't turn up. Young Dravis had displayed his on his desk without compunction, with nothing to hide. But what of the other students? It was obvious there were no public readers of the thoughts of Camus and Hesse. But did these two authors on the dark sides of man have readers in secret?

Bull called Lauderback again.

"Well, how is it going, Lieutenant?"

"Like an inspection in an army barracks forewarned of the inspec-

tion," said Bull. "No lint, no dust, no dirt."

"Then you've hit a blind alley," Lauderback said.

"Not completely. First, what do you know about a couple of authors, Camus and Hesse?"

"Camus is one of the French existentialists of the current century," said Lauderback. "Lonely, embittered. The literary hero of the alienated. Hesse was a German, of the same philosophical bent: Freudianism, psychology, spiritualism. We don't have them on any of our reading lists here at Bannon. At a time when a boy needs to be taught the positive values of teamwork and aggressive competition, the gloomy thoughts of these men would only be mentally disruptive.

"Don't misunderstand me, Lieutenant. Both are thinkers of the highest order, geniuses. But they take a disciple down some pretty dark passageways to get out into the light. And to a young boy darkness like that can be dangerous and an end unto itself."

"Did you know you had readers of these writers here at Bannon?" Bull said.

"We probably have readers of every famous writer here at Bannon," said Lauderback. "But Camus and Hesse we don't encourage."

"Did you also know that Lonnie Dravis was a disciple?"

"A disciple?" Lauderback's voice chuckled across the line. "A dabbler, maybe. But a disciple, no."

"I found some of these works on his desk this morning."

"And what kind of shape were they in?" asked Lauderback. "Dirt-smudged? Dog-eared? Cluttered with sophomoric rhetoric in all the margins?"

"No, they appear mint-new."

"See what I mean, Lieutenant? A dabbler. Not a devotee."

Lauderback had unwittingly pushed Bull back into the blind alley, for which he apologized, sending Bull back to room 601 to stare at the unblemished perfection all about him and the unblemished beauty of this act of murder.

It was while Bull pondered this —man's most dangerous act—that a new thought struck him. Danger! At Bannon School the dangers had been built into the structure of the system. Curfews, grounds checks, forbidden forays to Miss Prymms' School and to the Red Horse Bar.

At Bannon, there seemed enough light danger to pacify even the few prepsters whose thirst for intrepidation ran to greater depths. Then why create danger? Specifically, why create the ultimate danger, the penalty for which was something a good deal more painful than a slap on the wrist and a weekend's confinement?

Perhaps a void was being filled, thought Bull. But for that premise to hold up, there would have to be clear evidence that a number of Bannon students were not availing clear evidence that a number of

themselves of the accepted forms of system-beating.

Bull got back on the phone to Headmaster Lauderback. How was it coming, the headmaster wanted to know. Better, Bull told him, until the headmaster painted him into another corner. Did he want to look over the students' personal history forms? If so, he could have them removed to Room 106 in Savory Hall, the office of the French Language Instructor, where Bull could peruse them in privacy the rest of the afternoon. Bull thanked him, but he didn't think it would come to much good. The inconsistencies in personality he was seeking would no doubt be as cleverly hidden as the killer's identity.

But there were a couple of other favors the headmaster could do for him, Bull said. First, could he have a list of Bannon names circulated to the young ladies attending Miss Prymm's? For what purpose? To learn which, if any, of Bannon's students had yet to bring themselves to go out on a date.

"Yes, we can arrange that," Lauderback said. "Have it circulated this evening, in the dorms."

"I'd like it done sooner, if it's possible," Bull said.

"Circulate a list like that around a classroom? I don't know, Lieutenant. Even if we allowed the girls the anonymity of the check-mark, just the mere fact of kissing and telling in public might be just enough to cause some fibbing."

"Then have Miss Prymm or an advisor pull them out of class for a few minutes."

"Miss Prymm can be pretty nasty when it comes to overstepping authority," said Lauderback. "She's an attractive woman, don't get me wrong, Lieutenant. But, oh, she can be a real hardnose when she wants to."

"An offer of dinner at one of those out-of-the-way New England roadhouses might go a long way toward softening her up," Bull said.

"Know any?"

"Try the Old Mill outside of Action," Bull suggested. "Rustic warmth, ducks gliding gracefully on a serene mill pond. And try the Irish coffee and make sure they drop a full teaspoon of sugar into the glass before the glass is flamed."

"A return favor well-turned," said the headmaster. "You said two. What is the other?"

"I'd like the owner of the Red Horse Bar to go over the faces in the most recent edition of the Bannon yearbook and pick out the ones

who've formed any beer-drinking cliques. I'd like him to start going over them this afternoon and I'd also like to arrange some kind of meeting with him this afternoon—say—around five o'clock, in the Red Horse."

"Pleasant Pardulla," said Lauderback. "Yes, he owes me a favor or two for allowing our boys to trade there. I'll have to reach him at his home, though. He rarely shows up at the Red Horse much before eight o'clock in the evening."

"Stress his economic well-being," said Bull.

"Mr. Pardulla will not disappoint you," Lauderback promised. "These favors should be filled by four o'clock. What will you be doing in the meantime, so I can keep tabs on your movement."

"My movements will be very restricted," Bull told Lauderback. "I'll be in Room 601 of Dravis Dorm catching up on some old business I haven't tended to in forty hours or so."

"Old business? What would that be?"

"Sleep," Bull said.

AT FIVE O'CLOCK, Cleveland Bull was wakened slowly out of a fine, fitless sleep by insistent knocking at the door to Room 601. He opened it on a young boy in a high-coller military uniform who, after a brief moment at rigid attention, snapped out a hand holding a white manila envelope. And although he probably knew already just who Bull was, he couldn't keep his eyes from bugging out just a little at the sight of the service revolver strapped over Bull's white dress shirt.

The note — from Headmaster Lauderback — was brief and explicit. Enclosed he would find the asked-for check list revealing the male date-preferences of 175 young women. About the meeting with Pleasant Padulla at the Red Horse Bar, that had been successfully arranged for six p.m. Lauderback ended by expressing the hope that Bull's nap had been refreshing. And that Miss Prymm found the overture for an intimate dinner both intriguing and acceptable.

Pleasant Pardulla fitted the ring of his name as though its assignment had been given by a Madison Avenue advertising executive. A Los Angeles used car dealer, if Bull had ever seen one, and he'd seen many. Button-down cardigan of blazing orange. Pastel green shirt. Wide necktie of chocolate brown with sequin flecks.

He sat sprawled out at a desk in a cramped back office of the Red Horse Bar. A pack rat's delight. Beer cartons, empty aluminum beer kegs, electric beer and wine signs, cartons of snacks, pool cues. It was merely an exclamation point to the barroom through which Bull had walked to reach it.

"Lieutenant—whazzit?"

"Bull."

"Bull. Had a club boxer in these

parts 'bout ten years ago named Bull. Baby Bull. Dedham, Mass. Any *re*-late?"

"Don't think so."

"No, don't s'pose. Your being a cop. This guy had more hoods hangin' around him than a monk at a monks' convention. Baby Bull coulda been a good boy, all right, except they started cleanin' up the fight game 'bout that time, and Baby Bull was too thick with the unsavory characters. But one, helluva club fighter."

"Real blood 'n sweater, I'll bet," Bull told him. "I see you've been going over the book."

"Like Head Lauderback suggested, yeh," said Pardulla.

He had it centered before him on his desk, surrounded by adding machine tabulations, dog-earred copies of *Ring Magazine*, and slick covered volumes exalting the female form. From out of the mess of trivia Pardulla fished out a thick cigar and jammed it between fatty lips.

"Cliques, you want to know about," he said. "That it?"

Bull nodded.

"The preppies come in here to drink alla time, you unnerstand. The ones show they can't handle it don't get no second invitation. The others, if they don't make no trouble, can stay until closing. I'll be the first to admit I make a pretty fancy buck off these kids, Lieutenant. County tolerance policy says I can serve a baby in a bassinette, if I want. But I don't stand for no foolishness outta these kids."

"I'm sure you don't," Bull said. "Now, about these cliques."

Pleasant Pardulla nodded. He spun the yearbook so that it faced Bull and sent it through debris across the table.

"First, we get the jocks, the athletes. I marked little J's in the corners of their pictures. About twenty of them come in regular, maybe two, three nights a week. The arm-wrestlers — the chug-a-luggers. If these guys can't make some kind of contest out of it, they won't do it."

"How about the other groups?"

"Then we come to the eggheads, which I marked with a little E. The Glasses and Acne Set. Real bad customers."

"You mean they make trouble for you?"

"No, I mean they don't drink enough beer to put in your eye. Once in a while they'll splurge for a hard boiled egg or a sack of potato chips, but mostly they just nurse through a couple of beers and sit with their heads together and their mouths turned down."

"And these are the only two groups you get in here?"

"No, we get another bunch. Four of them. I marked them with a W. For Weirdos. Wow, are these guys ever weirdos."

Bull quickly scanned the faces for W's. One was placed in the square of a face named Erle Cavanaugh. He seemed to look like all

the others. Gray blazer jacket with red crest. Red-and-white striped military necktie. Face frozen in an artificial "say cheese" smile. Except for one thing; the eyes. They were strikingly deep and compelling eyes. Forceful eyes. Angry eyes.

In fact Bull couldn't help now but think he was drawn to these eyes specifically and initially, and not the letter W drawn by Pleasant Pardulla.

"How weird are they?" Bull asked.

"Corner-table-quiet-weird. Whispers and leers from these jokers, Bull. They don't talk to nobody and nobody talks to them and everybody seems to like that arrangement just fine."

Shortly Bull had found all four of them. Besides Cavanaugh, there was Tom DuBois, Mark Spitzer and Gayle Upshaw. They bore no concrete connection to the death of Lonnie Dravis, but something inside Bull nudged him to remember their names and faces.

"Haven't been too much help, Bull. Making book on fights I'm a terror. But anything else, I flop like a flounder on a pier."

"You've done all right," Bull said. "Just one other thing. Were any of these four in here last night?"

Pardulla thought about that for a moment. He twirled the big cigar between his lips. "You get a definite yes, on that," he said finally. "All four of them comes in here about seven, stay 'til about nine and leave. Took with them four bottles of cheap Port wine."

"One more thing. Which of the four would you say was the leader of this little cult?" The word came out of Bull's mouth instinctively, without forethought. They did seem a cult, though. Huddling, leering, whispering. It drew a couple of shivers up his spine.

"I'd say this here Cavanaugh kid," Pardulla said. "Anyway, every time I look up from behind the bar, he's the one doing all the talking."

Bull thanked him again and left. He went back out into the bar and took a seat at the end, nearest Pardulla's office. It was nearly eight-thirty, late enough for the Red Horse to begin gathering a crowd. Mingled together at tables and at the bar were miners and locals and Bannon students, forty or so all told, which made the place about one-third capacity.

Bull ordered a beer, while he pondered his long shot. He had time to burn now, because he knew he wasn't going to catch anybody with jam on his face. There was just one slender lead now and that was the foursome Pardully had tabbed as Weirdos.

He decided to wait out an hour to see if they would show up together. With what he had to go on, it couldn't hurt a thing. If they showed, he would routinely introduce himself in the hope of triggering a flicker of guilt, of tripping some granule of panic and thence a

set of loose lips and an unguarded tongue.

Bull was sipping foam from his third beer when the foursome came into the Red Horse Bar. They went straight to a table in a distant corner, but on his elevated stool Bull could see them unobstructed over the heads of the other customers. The instant they were seated Erle Cavanaugh with those expressive, slightly sunken Raskolnikov eyes whistled loudly and held up four slender fingers.

Bull gave them time to finish their first beer and become relaxed while he studied their faces in the bar's back mirror. Placid faces, like a pack of Cub Scouts who'd just come from polishing off a few good deeds. Except for the face of Erle Cavanaugh. He looked like he'd just polished off a couple bad ones.

Now furnished with something to go on, Bull pulled out the list of girls' names Lauderback had obtained. His eyes ran down the double - spaced list carefully, four pages worth. As he half-expected, the name of Lonnie Dravis was one of those with check-marks running clear to the right border, substantiating that he was as popular at Miss Prymm's as he was at Bannon.

Bull was prepared for what his eyes read next to the names of Cavanaugh, DuBois, Spitzer and Upshaw. Not a single check mark appeared.

Bull waited five more minutes and then went over to their table. Erle

Cavanaugh looked up as though Bull were making the gravest of intrusions. Bull leered back, took out his wallet and showed his badge.

"That's a fine looking badge, Lieutenant," Erle Cavanaugh said, unruffled. "By way of introduction, of course, it doesn't tell us much."

"My name is Lieutenant Bull," Bull said.

"Bull," mulled Cavanaugh. "Fine, descriptive name. Denotes strength. Although that word is also synonymous with faking and bluffing, as in that's-a-crock-of. As well as clumsiness and lack of finesse."

"You must be Erle Cavanaugh," Bull said, disregarding Cavanaugh's taunts. "And from left to right around the table: Mark Spitzer, Tom DuBois and Gayle Upshaw."

"Wonderful," said Cavanaugh, smiling faintly. "We're all introduced. That's wonderful."

There was a moment of silence. Minds hung in the air, thinking. Gayle Upshaw's mouth was open. Spitzer kept his eyes on his glass of beer which was hardly dented.

"Well, I would imagine you're here on some kind of official business," Erle Cavanaugh said. "About Lonnie Dravis possibly."

"I'm not here looking for recruits for the police academy," Bull said.

"It's good that you're not," said Cavanaugh. "By the time most of us here at Bannon graduate college and begin pulling down that fifteen thousand dollars in middle management or corporation research, what a detective makes wouldn't be enough to pay for gas and oil in the Ferrari."

"Most of you may make it into the world of business and commerce," said Bull, "but someone here at Bannon will be delayed by twenty years or so. Perhaps for the rest of his life."

Erle Cavanaugh wasn't intimidated. is cold eyes stared up at Bull without blinking. "The killer of Lonnie Dravis. If you've been able to prove his death wasn't an accident."

"We have. We're looking for a killer now."

Bull checked the faces around the table. DuBois and Upshaw watched Erle Cavanaugh with the intent rapture of an audience awaiting the world's greatest mind for another turn of genius. Mark Spitzer continued looking down into his beer glass.

"Killer, eh? Well, that will add to the excitement around this dull campus, anyway. Mind telling me how you decided on murder, Lieutenant?"

"No, not at all, Cavanaugh. Lonnie Dravis was found with a coathanger clutched in his right hand, hinting he was bringing in his wet wash sometime this morning and did a tumble out of his dorm window."

"Murdered by a coathanger," said Cavanaugh. "Probably marks the first time in the history of criminality that an inanimate object was ever charged and convicted of murder."

"Not quite, Cavanaugh. That coathanger was placed in Dravis' hand after he hit the walkway pavement. Except that the killer misplaced the coathanger in Dravis' right hand."

"Is that supposed to be a significant thing?" asked Cavanaugh.

"Reasonably significant," Bull said "It's impossible to take laundry in from a dorm window with the right hand."

Inadvertently, or guiltily, Mark Spitzer tipped over his beer glass. The act sent the others scooting back from the table to escape the flow across it.

"My, how thorough you are as a detective," said Cavanaugh, loudly attempting to cover Spitzer's blunder with his sharp voice. "I'll have

to try that little experiment sometime."

"Let's see now. All four of you live in Dravis' dorm, don't you? Roommates. Cavanaugh and Spitzer, DuBois and Upshaw. Have I got you paired correctly?"

"It's no government secret," Cavanaugh said icily. "It's all on the room chart in the dorm lobby."

"You and Spitzer in 612, DuBois and Upshaw in 506."

"That's right."

Bull spent a moment lighting a cigarette. They tasted dry and abrasive when he inhaled, but he needed something as a pause for effect. It seemed to be working. All the faces, save Cavanaugh's, looked ready to bolt and run and break down in tears.

"I don't suppose it would do me any good," Bull took up again, "to ask you for alibis for the time of the killing. You were all asleep in your rooms, right?"

"Just as snuggy as bugs, Lieutenant," Cavanaugh hissed.

"And last night, the four of you were in here until about nine o'clock, and then left with a bottle of port wine apiece. Wouldn't have been to get yourself up for something, would it?"

Upshaw emitted what seemed to Bull to be a psychological cough. Spitzer, at the same instant, shifted in his chair uneasily.

"To get us up for conversation," Cavanaugh said quickly. "Wine is an excellent companion for intellectual exchange. Wasn't it Pliny who said truth comes out in wine?"

Cavanaugh was obviously playing Conquer the Cop with Wit. And Bull was poorly armed for anything like that. So he merely clapped his hands softly and smiled.

"Now then—quick-draw quotations is over—let's get on to backgrounds. All of you are middle class. Except for you, Cavanaugh."

The mystical, deep eyes narrowed and darkened.

"You were born on the rim of East Los Angeles. Stone's throw from Ghettoland. Father was a train brakeman—when he worked. Mother a fabric cutter in a dress factory. Thirty years without a day missed from work."

"What is this?" Cavanaugh sneered. "Rub the progeny's nose in the dirt day? Genetic failure is hogwash, Lieutenant. I've proved I can make it at Bannon! So get off that kick!"

"You've proved you can make it at Bannon, yes," Bull said. "But it remains to be proved whether a student who made it here the hard way up harbors any hatred or jealousy for the kid who gets the red carpet treatment. The kid, who should he miraculously—say—forget his name—all he has to do is look up and see it etched in stone on the front of a campus building."

"Bull — *Bull,*" said Cavanaugh. "Psychological intent or wish to murder isn't a crime. Just how many people do you wish to see kicking

up the old sod, Lieutenant? Quite a number, I'll bet. You'll notice I have the good taste not to accuse you of murder."

"I'm not accusing anyone of murder, Cavanaugh, so idle your motor before you throw a rod. Then you've never felt any animosity toward Lonnie Dravis, is that right?"

"So Dravis was a blue-nose. So what? I'm aware of how the world is constituted. I'm aware of who gets by hard work and who gets by bequeathment and birth."

"No resentment and no jealosy," said Bull.

"Lieutenant," said Cavanaugh with a smile that seemed oddly turned and ulterior, "we're against animal tendencies here at Bannon."

"Well, someone wasn't against it."

"Ah, the murderer. I had forgotten for a moment. Sorry."

"And gone back into the woodwork now."

Cavanaugh shook his head. "Pity."

"But we're going to give it a little more time before we file it as an unsolved crime," Bull told him. "With your permission."

"You're the detective — Detective."

Inside Bull's body fumed. He was getting somewhere and nowhere, both at the same time. He was on the verge of touching that certain something he needed and at the same instant a million light years from its grasp.

He stubbed out his cigarette and began to button his topcoat. Now there was just one slender bit of razzle-dazzle left and he saw no need to leave it unused.

"One other thing, fellas," he said as offhandedly as he could. "If you're all concerned about catching the killer of Lonnie Dravis—and I believe you are—you might be encouraged to learn that we have a couple of small clues to work with. Fingerprints left themselves on that coathanger. And there were some smudged impressions on the window pane in Lonnie Dravis' room. Just in case you fellows find it tough going to find something to talk about, I'll leave you with those tidbits."

Bull didn't wait for a response, but left his words hanging in the air, ringing with accusations, overseeing guilt. He merely nodded a jerky goodbye.

The air beyond the door to the Red Horse Bar was lightly fogged and chilly. Cleveland Bull took some deep breaths of it and then walked across the street to his car in the graveled, tree-log compounded parking lot. He got in and slouched behind the wheel. He was prepared to stay until the Red Horse closed or until something else happened.

He knew the fingerprints were his only leverage to create fear and those fingerprints seemed as powerful as a staff of bamboo lifting a building from its foundation. But

he had only bluff left in his arsenal and bluff it would have to be. If it worked he could depend on either one of the foursome pointing a swift finger of guilt at the killer, or he could depend on one of them to be Erle Cavanaugh's emissary of death. If it worked.

He waited. A narrow wedge of moon moved through a thinly misted sky, or appeared to move as gray clouds crept slowly across its face. Bull turned on the car radio and got a station from Boston. An announcer for a civic-type commercial was giving an address where listeners could get more information about stopping the rising crime rate. In Bull's current situation it was not a comforting thought.

Twenty minutes passed. Bull assumed they were discussing how hot the fire was getting, how valid Bull's clues were. At least he hoped that was what they were doing. He knew they could just as easily be sitting and drinking beer and discussing philosophy.

It was while Bull's resolution wavered that Mark Spitzer appeared on the steps of the Red Horse Bar. For a moment he stood marble still, peering out into the haze of fog, into the street, into the parking lot shortly beyond. Spitzer was looking for something. Or someone.

A minute went by and then Mark Spitzer started down the wood steps and across the street, heading toward the parking lot. Bull noticed something altogether unnatural in his walk, a kind of stiffened artificiality to it. It couldn't have been from beer, he'd only had time for a couple and besides, Pardulla told Bull this group never drank more than that.

Bull had worked narcotics for a time before he was promoted, and it seemed to him young Spitzer moved with all the mannerisms of a drug addict: the slow; exaggerated movement of the arms, the careening way he walked, as though for the time being his motor abilities had been altered and possessed by drugs.

This was a terrible moment, because Bull was totally aware that young Spitzer was coming at him in one of two capacities: either as a boy about to confess to knowledge of an act of murder or the murder itself—or as the mentally addicted emissary of Erle Cavanaugh.

Quickly Bull got out of the car. He drew his service revolver and dropped it to his right side. If this was just a harmless, false alarm he didn't want Spitzer to be frightened by it into silence.

The young, slightly flushed face stopped within a foot of Bull's. It held no expression, nor did the eyes. He wore a dark blue hip-length windbreaker jacket, with both hands thrust into the pockets. Bull drew the pistol a bit farther behind his back and kept his finger soft on the trigger.

"I have to talk with you, Lieutenant," Spitzer said.

"Fine, Spitzer. What about?"

Spitzer didn't seem to be listening. His eyes were all over the parking lot. Bull moved the pistol a little bit forward. "It's nice and quiet here," Spitzer said. "I mean, we can talk without being interrupted."

"You've already made it clear to me you want to talk, Mark. Just what do you want to talk about?"

"You see, Erle tells us that man ought to submit to all of his impulses, because only then can he be true to himself. He tells us our impulses should not be hidden behind the masks of social status and economic leverage, because these are destructive forces working in a subtle way. Erle tells us to give release to our passions in an honest way and not hide them behind the false weapons of language and social position and money."

The eyes grew wider. Intermittently, the heavy pupils disappeared. The hands continued to fidget in the pockets of the windbreaker.

"Erle tells you all of this," said Bull carefully. "Do you do everything Erle Cavanaugh tells you to do?"

"Erle exerts a powerful influence over my life," said Spitzer, like a phonograph record. "He has released me from confusion and doubt and loneliness. He has explained to me the roles of Satan and God in man and that we need not be ashamed to let Satan work his will. I have killed and I am not ashamed or afraid of the consequences of such an act. I have killed and I know peace."

"You killed Lonnie Dravis," Bull said in a low voice.

Trancelike, Mark Spitzer nodded. "Through Erle I was made aware of my hatred for him, his perfection, his life that gone on without pain or hardship or want. I was taken to Abraxas and his hand touched my mind and freed me to kill."

Abraxas, the devil. Bull swallowed with distaste and revulsion. The real killer of Lonnie Dravis would go unpunished. The hands that pushed Lonnie Dravis from his dormitory window belonged to Mark Spitzer but the mind of Erle Cavanaugh contained the premeditation of that murder.

Mark Spitzer would be judged temporarily insane and be released from the responsibility of his actions. But society very possibly would never be able to prove Erle Cavanaugh the real murderer.

And now, through the weakened, confused mind of Mark Spitzer, Erle Cavanaugh was about to kill again. He was about to see second fruits of the transference of his hatred.

Mark Spitzer would kill blindly now, without concern for his own safety. Bull's pistol would be about as useful as a twig. There they stood just a few yards apart. Bull was next to the door of his car and

young Spitzer just beyond the car's front bumper.

Bull could do nothing, could think of nothing to save his life without destroying the body of Mark Spitzer before society could have a look at his mind. The real world no longer existed for this group of cultists, those fire gazers—and yet in Mark Spitzer's fantasy world he held the upper hand and didn't even know it.

Slowly Mark Spitzer's right hand came from the pocket of the windbreaker. A small, nickel-plated pistol flashed. Mark Spitzer held it delicately in his fingers and palm like a small silver bird.

Bull was cornered. Raising his own pistol for a bluff would only cause Spitzer to kill him instantly. And the longer he stood there the less control he could exert and the more hatred Spitzer could summon in the stillness and silence.

A minute earlier his mind had touched on something useful but he'd let it pass into his subconscious. Now he tried to drum it up again, yanked at it frantically like a dentist going at a deep-rooted tooth. It was something about Mark Spitzer killing blindly, something about cultists which had triggered a Rube Goldberg kind of hunch he hadn't at the moment put much faith in. But what?

He watched as Mark Spitzer's lips curled into a slight grin, as his slender index finger snaked out in search of the pistol's trigger.

Bull was just a few heartbeats from his death and he knew it. And then, as if his mind was receiving the vibrations that might only have a few moments left for thought, it thrust the slender idea back into Bull's consciousness. It was not much better than nothing. But something.

Carefully now, so as not to draw Spitzer's strict attention, Bull inched himself forward until his right side came abreast of his car's wing window. He was in luck; it was opened slightly.

He transferred the pistol to his left hand behind his back and under the semi-cover of fogged darkness reached his right hand up and pulled the triangle of glass open wide enough to accept his hand and arm.

"Justice without mercy seems to me the most humane justice of all," Spitzer was saying, oblivious to everything but his own entranced ravings. "We must live out our dreams, make altars of them. We must act out our hatreds, if they be the most powerful force within us. This must be done, Lieutenant. Erle will be angry with me, if I don't act upon my instincts and he will destroy me in a thousand little ways."

Bull held his breath as his fingers groped along the dashboard. Mark Spitzer's voice was changing now, becoming more strident, louder, rising in intensity and volume. Each second the confused boy spent raving and choosing not to close his

finger down on the pistol's trigger Bull knew was a second of borrowed time.

Bull's mind ticked off the rank of knobs as his fingertips brushed them: windshield wipers, heater-defrost, air-conditioning, cigarette lighter. Then he was touching the fifth one, hoping he hadn't missed one or counted wrong, and with a single, abrupt motion pulled it out full.

In the sudden explosion of glaring headlights, Mark Spitzer's eyes snapped wide open and frozen in a blank stare. He did not blink, nor did he squint in an attempt to reduce the harsh light, not even when Bull tore open the door and slammed his right foot down on the high-beam button. He was as helpless as a field rabbit caught in the rays of a hunter's flashlight at night.

But Spitzer was not so completely neutralized to forget he was holding a pistol. He snapped three quick shots off as Bull dropped to his chest in the gravel. The first or second caught him in the left shoulder. The shock of it feeling so close to his heart had caused him to instinctively drop the pistol. He could only grope for it a few seconds on the dark ground behind the headlights. For all his success it might have fallen into a bottomless slash in the earth.

Then he was rolling to his right beneath his car and then on beneath the one next to it, his body brushing and scraping their rugged, jutting undersides, bumping on his wound.

He came up on the far side of the second car eye-level with its hood. He touched his left shoulder softly; it was drenched in blood.

Mark Spitzer had not moved a step. He still stood rigidly mesmerized by Bull's headlights, letting the demon of light work away at his senses, almost looking to be worshipping it.

Bull took one deep breath and then sprinted out from behind the car in a low crouch. At the sound of crunching gravel, Mark Spitzer whirled vaguely and fired two last shots well above Bull's head and then Bull was up to him, clamping the boy's arms at his sides and disarming him of the pistol. When Bull slipped the handcuffs over the boy's wrists pinned behind his back, Spitzer did not resist.

"I didn't mean to kill him, sir," Spitzer said. He was beginning to cry. His body shuddered with each intake of breath. "I mean, I didn't even dislike Lonnie. It was Erle hated him, sir. When Erle gets to talking to you about it, it's something he makes you feel you just have to do."

"You have a right to remain silent, Mark," Bull said swiftly, fulfilling the legal obligations before Spitzer could talk on any further. "And you have the right to a telephone call and the right to be represented by legal counsel. But if you waive your right to silence, anything you say may be used in evi-

dence against you. Do you understand?"

"You see, sir, last night we got to drinking wine, sir,"

Bull shook him silent and repeated his question loudly into his ear. "Mark! Do you understand your rights? Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir," Mark Spitzer said. "I understand." He coughed and sniffed through his nose several times to halt his tears. "After the wine back at the dorm, Erle started in on us. There's something about him that frightens you, sir. Something a little sinister. But at the same time you respect and admire him. I remember sneaking in a tent revival meeting once when I was a kid. Erle, he's just like that preacher I saw. One minute you swear he's a spitting maniac and the next, you swear he's the greatest thing since Jesus himself."

"We'll have to make a trip downtown, Mark," Bull said. "Is there anywhere you'd like to notify?"

Mark Spitzer threw a fearful glance across the street, toward the Red Horse Bar. "I go back in there with you, and Erle will kill both of us. I mean he's a talker and a revivalist, but he's also a coward. Like last night. I mean, after he had us all whipped up and everything he made us draw cards out of a poker deck to see who'd do the killing. I drew the first ace. Erle never touched that deck of cards. He was scared stiff of it.

"Then, at four a.m., we all went down to Lonnie's room and let ourselves in. His door was unlocked. I think he was the only guy in the whole dorm ever left his door unlocked nights.

"Then they watched while I did it, Erle egging me on with those eyes of his. He's got a way of looking at you, sir, would make you kill your own mother if Erle told you to. Anyway, that's when I pushed him out the window. I had Erle's pistol on him and I just kept backhim up until he went out of it backwards. That's when I went downstairs and put the coathanger in his hand to make it look like he was dragging in his laundry when he fell."

"Didn't the dorm orderly see you when you came downstairs?" Bull asked.

"He was sacked out in the office in the dorm's lobby. The D.O.'s are supposed to stay awake all night, but most of them sack out about two or three o'clock. I put a dictionary in the door to hold it open. Then we all went to bed to wait for somebody to find his body."

Mark Spitzer was all talked out. He sobbed quietly now, without tears and tried to catch his breath like a runner who had just finished a tortuous two - mile race.

Bull had wanted to take Mark Spitzer back into the Red Horse Bar for the phone call so that Erle Cavanaugh could get one last helpless look at his plans laying in ruin. Probably, he still was not aware

that he could be charged and convicted of murder, that Mark Spitzer might be adjudged temporarily insane through the hypnotic powers Erle Cavanaugh had wielded over him. Bull had wanted to throw that same foxy smile right back into his face.

Rain began as they started out in Bull's car for Boston. The pain in Bull's shoulder was growing but the bleeding had stopped. Spitzer noticed Bull holding it stiffly and said, "Shot you, I guess. Bad?"

"To stop a cop it takes a bullet right between the eyes," Bull said. "Don't you ever read detective novels?"

"No, sir. We don't have a lot of time for outside reading. There's a lot of academic pressure here."

"But you got around to Hesse and Camus, though."

"That was Erle's idea. It was all part of the cult. I mean, you had to read the books if you wanted to join the cult."

"The cult of Abraxas," Bull said.

Mark Spitzer seemed a little flabbergasted at that. Even in the near darkness of the car speeding along the unlit Massachusetts highway, Bull could see his mouth drop open.

"You even knew about that?" Spitzer said, in an amazed voice.

"Few of us ever had the fortune to attend a prep school like Bannon," Bull said, lightly, "but we get along."

"Anyway," said Spitzer, "I'm glad Abraxas is over. I'm glad it's all over."

"Better brace yourself, Mark. This is just the beginning."

"Yeah, I see what you mean. The trial and everything."

"And the end of the short and happy life of Mark Spitzer, if Hemmingway doesn't mind me paraphrasing his title."

"He'd be honored," Bull said. They drove on through the winding countryside in silence, until they hit the parkway and headlights and hints of civilization.

"Cheer up, Mark," Bull said as he swung the car onto the endless-looking carpet of concrete.

Mark Spitzer kept his head on his chest. "Cheer up," he said hopelessly. "What for?"

"I don't like to second-guess the judicial side of the law, because I'm just a policeman doing a job. But I'd be willing to bet this will be more a matter of the end of the short and unhappy life of Erle Cavanaugh. And that Mark Spitzer may come out of this nightmare all right."

"You really think so?"

"I really think so."

The smile on the face of Mark Spitzer was not one to light the world, but it was bright enough to be seen by Lieutenant Cleveland Bull through the soft wash of parkway arc lights.

And bright enough to give them both enough courage to face the new beginning.

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Please print **April—1971**

I, OSCO BRONO, AM BACK

by LEONARD J. GUARDINO

She died hard, as she had lived, the torn, tattered termagant from Manila's slums. But in her dying she had managed to leave one last, grim legacy: a reason for, a key to—Murder . . .

CAPTAIN OF DETECTIVES Ronald Roe had been an American soldier who chose to remain in Manila rather than go back to the States after the end of World War Two.

He gave as reason that returning home by ship or plane would make him sick enough to wish to die — and he was too young to do so.

I, Osco Brono, ex-guerilla at the time, told him he was probably wanted for bigamy or worse in America. But actually Corporal Ronald Roe loved Filipino people; especially me—after he had sold me a bum wrist watch for which I never got the money back.

Later we joined the Manila Police Department. I don't know why. Roe said he knew why. He said he became a cop because if he ever wanted to call a cop he wouldn't have to go far. In those post war days Roe was always full of fun. Today, after twenty-five years, he was just full of it—booze and hangovers. Me, too.

Roe used to have a shock of red hair that Filipino girls loved to run their bare feet through. But it had all but disappeared off his head. A red mustache now grew on his upper lip; and though Roe was still lanky, he had become cranky.

"That damned Osco here yet?" he asked a uniformed cop in the crowded two-and-a-half room apartment.

"He's not here yet," the cop informed Roe.

Roe muttered under his mustache and looked at the dead body on the bed.

It was a woman. Her unseeing

eyes seemed to stare back accusingly at the captain. Disheveled bed clothes were stained with blood. Two reporters approached Roe. One was from a local Chinese newspaper which also published in English and was full of typographical errors.

Roe asked the Chinese reporter, "You gonnà misspell my name again in your paper, like you did the last time?"

"So solly. No, Mr. Loe."

"Show him out!" Roe ordered.

The other reporter, a Hungarian, asked for some facts about the murder and Roe gave it to him. The fingerprint men had finished working on a large black pocketbook and

handed it to the captain. The latter walked away from the reporter and it was at this point that I, Osco Brono, entered the place. No sooner Roe spotted me, he filled me in.

"A Miss Mae Dupree, forty-two, stabbed dead by party unknown. Brief struggle. One chair upset. Mrs. Cecilia Trust, fifty-four, widow, cleaning woman found body 1 p.m. Coroner set death at 10 a.m. No murder weapon on premises. Victim wore pajamas, underwear intact. No rape. This pocketbook was found in bathroom, over one hundred bucks in it. Marks on fingers and wrist prove victim wore jewelry, but no jewelry in the house. Where were you, Osco?"

I couldn't tell a lie. "I was at Tiny Tim's Tavern."

"You smell it! Go get acquainted with the dead."

I went to look at the body.

The dead woman was handsome. Despite her French name, she appeared Turkish or Greek. Her body was slim. A photographer was busy shooting pictures. The coroner, a small elderly Siamese showed me the stab wound. The missing knife had torn through her heart. The coroner sighed and covered the body. Two men took it out.

I glanced at a short, stout Filipino woman of about fifty. She was sitting on a chair and shaking her body slightly to and fro in mournful aspect. She held on her lap a brown paper bag with three cans of detergent in it. The cleaning woman.

Not far behind her, another woman, past seventy and very skeletal, was squatting on the bamboo floor. Her face was wrinkled deeply, and expressionless. She looked Korean.

I went back to the captain and asked, "Who's the little old lady?"

"Mrs. Pagan. Too feeble to stand up. Widow. Lives alone upstairs. Said she didn't hear anything between 10 a.m. and 1 p.m. Hearing not too good, anyway. Said, too, that landlord went to cockfights at 7 a.m. Watched him leave from window. Landlord lives in basement. Bachelor."

Roe withdrew a three by four snapshot from the big bag. He walked over to the squatting woman and showed her the picture. It was of a balding Japanese about fifty, handsome and wearing a faint smile.

"Yes," said the old woman. "I see him sometimes. Say hello, say good-by. But don't know name. Miss Dupree say once he work in her place. Books. No. I never hear fight. Very quiet. Please — I go up now?"

"Not yet, Mom," said Roe, walking away.

The captain took a small card out of the handbag. He copied down a home number from it.

"The dead woman's employer, publisher Otto Wu," Roe explained to me.

A Filipino, just under five feet tall, about forty, appeared at the doorway. He smelled like a chicken

coop. He stared at the blood on the bed.

"Golly hell!" he exclaimed. "What happen?"

Roe told him. Then the little man said he was the landlord. The cockfights had been held in a warehouse near the waterfront, not far from Jones Bridge. "I go regular every Saturday, and I just come back."

Roe showed him the snapshot. "Is this her boy friend?"

"Yes. Carl Ibex. Go with her for whole year, now. I talk to him many times. Nice polite man, but bow too much. Hit my head, once."

"Anybody else ever visit Miss Dupree besides her boy friend?"

"Nobody. Lady live here maybe three, four years."

"Ever hear them quarrel?"

"No, very quiet, except—" the little man shrugged.

"Except what?" Roe demanded.

"Except when their bed shake." The landlord shrugged again.

The captain turned his back on him, muttering, and walked over to the cleaning woman.

"Mrs. Trust," he said, "you told me you found Miss Dupree's door locked. Are you certain?"

"Yes. I opened it with key she gave me when I come to work for her month ago."

A husky, large-bosomed policewoman came in. The captain told her to bring the cleaning woman in the bathroom and search her. No jewelry was found on Mrs. Cecilia Trust. Then the little old lady was searched in her upstairs apartment. The policewoman reported: "Nothing on her. Nothing in the house."

That same afternoon, at headquarters, the captain was going through some papers at his desk. I walked to the big window and watched the traffic in the streets. It is always hot in Manila, but no one complains of the heat. Much squawking, however, begins at monsoon season, when floods and ruined rice crops give people weather to curse about.

"Well?" said Roe, still looking at papers.

"I checked the cockfights. Landlord got there after seven. Questioned witnesses. Say he bet on every rooster bout. Never left the place until 1:30.

"They remember because he was a big mouth, lose or win," I said.

"Fingerprint report just came in. Miss Dupree's prints were all over, naturally. Another type were all over the bedposts. Boy friend, no doubt."

"Any check on the cleaning woman, Mrs. Cecilia Trust?"

"Neighbors saw her arguing with a fish peddler, outside her house, at 10:03 a.m. Later she stopped at a grocery and walked to Miss Dupree's house only four blocks, at 12:55, and discovered the body at 1. What do you make of it all, Osco?"

"An outsider," I said. "Probably a burglar."

"A hell of an amateur if it was!

Takes only the jewelry and leaves a big black pocketbook unsearched."

Roe picked up the phone and got Otto Wu, publisher, on the wire. Roe gave the news of Miss Dupree's death.

"Oh my goodness God!"

Sounded Chinese, I thought.

"Where can we find her boy friend, Carl Ibex?"

"Carl? Went fishing this morning five o'clock. Always go fishing Saturday. Went on Captain Manchu boat, Pier sixteen. Fishing hours six morning to four afternoon."

"How do you know this?"

"Oh. Go fishing with Carl many times."

"Where were you at about ten this morning, Mr. Wu?"

"In bed. Sick. Got flu. Doctor come to see me ten o'clock this morning. My wife here. She tell you."

"Never mind, Mr. Wu. Get well."

Roe hung up.

"I was thinking," I said. "If Miss Dupree's door was open, an unknown person killed her. If she opened the door, maybe she knew the person."

"An unknown burglar can pick a lock. You forget." He threw up his hands. He looked at his wristwatch. "Come on. Let's jump in the car."

We drove to Pier Sixteen. Carl Ibex, in person, looked more bald than Japanese. Maybe because there was more head on him. Past fifty and stout, he bowed many times to our credentials. Roe got a headache and went to see Cap' Manchu. Ibex stopped bowing when I spilled the bad news. He gave three short sobs and recovered face quickly, his eyes misty.

Back in the squad car, I drove off.

"I spoke to Manchu," Roe said. "Said he pulled his boat out at six and never touched land until 3:48. The fishing bugs on his boat verified this."

Carl Ibex sat in the rear, his panama squashed against his face.

I said to Roe, "Ibex told me he gave Miss Dupree a five-hundred-dollar engagement ring, wrist watch and other jewelry. They were to be married July nineteenth. I wrote down the description of the stuff—" I handed a piece of note paper to Roe.

WE STOPPED AT the morgue. Ibex identified the corpse. Five minutes later we dropped the grieving Japanese off at his favorite tavern on Quezon Boulevard, and we couldn't blame him.

All hock shops in Manila were checked. We questioned known burglars that might have been in the vicinity of the murder premises. We appealed to the underground. Not a squeal from a stoolie. Not a thing to go on.

Roe shook his head and smiled without meaning it. It was now five days after Miss Dupree's murder.

He said, "One of those cases, Osco, where the police commissioner has threatened to deport me back to Pottsdale, Ohio, if I don't do any better. And, truthfully. I feel like packing right now."

Captain Ronald Roe wasn't alone in this. The commissioner had also rudely insinuated that I, Osco Brono, would be jailed for impersonating a detective.

I said, "I'll go to Pottsdale with you, Captain."

A strange break in the Dupree murder case came when publisher Otto Wu paid us an unexpected visit. Mr. Wu was a near-ancient Chinese, but unorthodox because he had a very expressive face which showed more worry on it than we were doing. He was thin, had a wisp of silver beard and was only slightly bowed.

"Ah! We meet not by telephone this time. How you do, Captain?"

"Fine!" Roe leaned forward on his desk, smoking a thin but long cigarello. "This is detective Osco Brono," he said.

I nodded, shaking his hand, and gave him a seat near the desk.

"Thank you, Detective Brono." The old man nodded back, taking out from under his kimono a magazine. He placed it on the desk.

"Captain," he said, "this magazine come out on newsstand this morning. There's story in it, 'Rebel Without Horse.' Same story was was stolen from Miss Dupree!"

Roe tried to keep calm, but his quick cigar puffing gave him away. He knew better than to say anything. The old man continued.

"I gave this story to Miss Dupree to take home and read April 6, day before she die. Story was not called 'Rebel Without Horse' then, when I receive it in mail from B. Bogado. I know because I read story from top to bottom and was first called, 'Loose Spirit.'

"Also author is not 'Jay Gomez' like it say in magazine, Captain. Real author B. Bogado. Now his story is in another magazine, *The Chaser Magazine,* word for word, but under different title and different author name!"

Busy with our own thoughts, Wu went on. "Real author is B. Bogado. Know him well. I buy many stories from him. Now if Bogado see this story in another magazine, he will

yell what the hell going on, like American say, and sue me bankrupt!"

Rue crushed out his cigarello in the ashtray. "Who publishes this magazine?"

"Competitor. V. Aliman. I have phone number."

V. Aliman had a loud voice over the wire. He said he had received the story "Rebel Without A Horse" in the mail on April ninth, on a Monday; had accepted it, published it today, already had put a check of $200 through the mail, made out to a Jay Gomez, P.O. Box 123, Manila. And that was it.

No, he didn't know Jay Gomez. All he knew was that he had read the story, liked it, printed it and paid on publication date.

"Company policy. I don't care what Wu's hard luck story is. The story was mailed to me — What? Wait. Here's the manuscript. Yes. Former address and title seem to have been scratched out by ballpoint, and handwritten on it is 'Jay Gomez' box number and the title 'Rebel Without A Horse.'

"No, Captain, this is not unusual. Many authors make changes at the last minute before mailing their manuscripts and give their story a new title. Huh? Okay. You can send someone to pick up the manuscript."

Roe hung up.

"What's B. Bogado's phone number?" he asked Otto Wu.

The old man, instead of answering, handed Roe a brief note.

Dear Mr. Wu, I hope you like this story 'Loose Spirit.' You can take your time reading it. I am flying on a vacation, today, to my mother in Cebu Island. Will be away two weeks. Best regards to your wife, Respectfully, B. Bogado.

The note was signed April 5th, two days before Miss Dupree's demise.

Roe grabbed the phone and checked with the airport. Bogado had left for Cebu on a 9:40 p.m. plane, Friday, April 5th.

"Enter new suspect. Absolved same suspect," the captain said. "But sure'n hell, somebody might come for that two hundred smackers in the post office tomorrow."

I walked to the window. On the street a stray, bilious caribou had locked horns with the bumper of an automobile and was holding up traffic four blocks long. Long toots blared and drivers cursed. A little boy, probably the caribou's master, kept hitting the animal with a stick. The captain was telling the Chinese publisher that his woes would be over when they caught the thief.

"Meantime, don't give any lip to reporters about the plagarism. That's all we need, the thief giving the post office the cold snub!"

When Otto Wu went away, Roe got up and walked to the window. He said, "We got something to bite on and you're not excited, Osco?"

"I haven't been excited since the Wacs came to the Philippines," I said. "But how about that old Chinese? Man, has he got sharp eyes! He discovered the plagarism quickly. And yet it is very odd that the murderer took the manuscript along with the jewelry."

"Too strange," the captain admitted. "He overlooked over a hundred bucks in the pocketbook, too. But I'm glad he stole the manuscript."

The traffic downstairs was loosening slowly. The boy had steered the caribou on the sidewalk and was kicking its rear. Roe had gone back to his swivel chair, and began dreaming, eyes wide open. I could guess what was going on through his mind, the mental pictures of a pair of manacles slapped securely on the murder's wrists near Box 123—and later, drinks, cigars and a round of golf with the police commissioner.

Early next morning, when the post office opened, the captain had assigned two policewomen and a plainclothesman, pretending to be wirting letters on the high desk-stands.

I, Oscar Brono, had assumed a janitor's role, replete with broom and dustpan. I pointed out to Roe that he should not have taken the post office superintendent into confidence, that if a postal employee were in on the crime, it could upset the whole applecart.

"We could have done this on our own just to see who, if any, opens Box 123—and wham!" I said.

"Osco," said the captain, "your English has improved greatly over the years. I remember you when you used to yap, 'I kill three Jap'; 'Is United States much beautiful?'; and that kind of talk. You've improved considerably ever since, but your thinking hasn't!"

He shook his head with pity and walked away.

I could have told him that his Tagalog was most atrocious, as well.

The pigeon-holes the P.O. boxes had windows no bigger than an American half-dollar. In Box 123 was the envelope with the $200 check in it, which could not be seen unless one put his nose to the small, round window.

Roe was talking to the superintendent, a short, fuzzy-headed, New Guinea black man about sixty. His name was Charleston Heston, no doubt an adopted monicker. He was telling Roe that a person he didn't remember had rented Box 123.

"We have over two hundred boxes in this damn old post office," he said. "I wouldn't know a damn Jay Gomez from a damn pole in the ground."

Roe cursed softly and left the post office. He posted himself next door in a tavern, and began to shoot pool with the Turkish proprietor.

In nearly four hours of doodling on paper, the three policewomen

and the one plainclothesman, including myself, had witnessed, intermittently, six women and nine men come to open their respective mail boxes. But Box 123 had been untouched and totally ignored.

Roe entered with a new shift. Before it was assigned he went over to take a close look into Box 123. He bent down. Then he straightened up like someone had hit him.

"The letter's gone!" he said with disbelief.

We crowded around, mystified. The supe was called.

"Open that box!" Roe commanded.

This was done hastily. One look told the whole story. The bottom metal plate was bent upward! Box 123 had been entered into from the box below it, Box 133! No letter.

I examined the bent plate. "A screw has been taken out! Probably days before by the thief!"

"How do you like that?" said Roe, like he could weep.

"Damn old post office," said Charleston Heston. "Not my damn fault, captain."

"Right under your lovely little noses!" swore Roe. "All right, Who opened box one-three-three?"

I went next door, at that moment, for a much needed drink.

The captain came some minutes later, ordering a double nipa. We could not recover from the shock of such a cleverly executed burgling phenomenon.

"You! I'm surprised at you, Osco. I thought you were good at memorizing peoples' descriptions. You know what I'm going to do before I get busted? I'm going to bust two policewomen, a plainclothesman, and guess who else?"

"Have you sent them to stop the check?"

"All of them, to all the banks in the city."

We had two more doubles before we left there.

The newspapers got the story of the slick box number trick from the damn superintendent of the post office. Readers were laughing. Roe wanted to break Charleston Heston's nose. I didn't want to say I-Told-You-So to Roe. I enjoyed breathing through my nose. Then the commissioner zephyred into the captain's office, created a squall, and left becalmed. Deep embarrassment, rage and failure harrassed both mine and Roe's sensibilities.

AFTER THE LONG, painful silence, following the commissioner's stormy leave-taking, Roe said, "One little screw! Removed! Box 133—right under Box 123—and the totem-headed superintendent doesn't even remember what the person who rented Box 133 looks like either! Just a 'Sara Jones'!"

"An unattractive woman about twenty-five. Black hair with blonde streaks, cut short. Height five feet three. Slim. Small breasts," I said.

"Who?" asked Roe.

"Sara Jones," I said, with a tortured look.

"You remember? Box one-three-three?" Roe stressed.

"Yes. But only what I have given you. The face—" I shook my head and began pacing the office floor.

"The face, Osco? Think!"

"That's just it! I have a mental block about the face. The more I try to think, the more my head hurts, Roe. No use."

"Why didn't you give me this description before, at least?"

"It just occurred to me now."

Roe slapped the desk. "What's the use, is right! Even with the face description, Sara Jones would look like two thousand other women." He sank in his chair.

"I think I will jump out of the window," I said, much frustrated.

"It's only one flight down. Why don't you go up on the roof and make a better job of it?" Roe said, grabbing his panama.

"Where are you going?"

"Come on. We can use a drink."

We left the office feeling mocking eyes upon us. But no one was looking our way. Nevertheless the captain retaliated with dirty looks. Once outside, I felt better. I don't know about Roe.

We entered Tiny Tim's Tavern on the corner. There was one customer in the far end of the bar, dancing the rhumba by himself. He looked like a Bedouin. The Tasmanian bartender shut off the juke box and served us.

For nearly a half hour we untoasted the police commissioner, the damn post office superintendent and all homicide cases. Roe drank nipa. I drank tuba. The bum near the silent juke box was singing a foreign song with four letter words of American extraction. The bartender yelled at him to keep it clean.

"That's it!" I put my drink down.

"What is?" Roe put his drink down, too.

"It's Cecilia Trust — the cleaning woman!"

We got out of the car a few minutes later. We stood in a poor residential section of Rizal Avenue looking at an unsanitary, rickety, bamboo one-family house.

It was starting to get dark. A big Luzon moon was focusing itself clearer against a background of an orange-black sky. A light in the house was on. Roe and I walked to one of the two ground floor windows and looked into the kitchen.

What met my eyes also affected Roe's thin face. His eyes popped wide.

"It's her!" he whispered. "The woman you described."

"Sara Jones," I said. "Will you let me handle it?"

"Let's go!"

I knocked on the door. The woman answered. She was about twenty-five, homely, and about five feet three. The black hair and the blonde streaks. Good thing it wasn't a wig she could remove.

I showed my credentials. She looked nervous.

"Come in," she said.

Once inside, we looked around. There didn't seem to be anyone else in the house, unless the bedrooms —we could see two of them—were hiding someone.

"What is your name?" I asked.

"Mary Trust."

"Mrs. Cecilia Trust your mother?"

"Yes, but she's not in."

"Where is she?"

"At a movie."

Roe hurried into the bedrooms.

"Sit down," I told the frightened woman. She sat near the table, wringing her hands.

I said, "Does your mother know what you did?"

"No." she half shouted. "Not a thing. I swear!"

"You killed Miss Mae Dupree," I stated calmly.

With her eyes on the bamboo floor, she nodded, then said, "Yes. But my poor mother knows nothing of it. Please believe me."

"I will try. Tell me how you did it?"

At that moment, the captain came out of the bedroom carrying a large red ladies handbag saying, "Found it under a mattress. Diamond ring, wrist watch—everything's all there, including the two-hundred-dollar check and the murder weapon, a letter opener." He lifted it out with a clean handkerchief.

"Mary," I said. "Go on."

"Yes." She took a deep breath and shivered. "My mother told me that Miss Dupree worked for a publishing house. I went to see her last Saturday. I knocked, she opened the door, and when I told her I was Mrs. Trust's daughter, she let me in.

"When I told Miss Dupree if she would appraise my stories—I'm a writer, you know — Well, she got angry and said I woke her up. It was only nearly ten in the morning. I apologized. Then when she saw my stories were handwritten, she said I had a terrible handwriting and threw the stories on the floor!

"That made me angry and I slapped her. She hit me back. I became like a crazy thing, then. We began fighting. Then I saw a letter-opener on her small desk and I stabbed her. I wiped the weapon on the bedspread and put in in my red handbag.

"Very strange—"she paused—"I didn't feel sorry for her. I felt like

another woman, much evil. I picked up my stories and was about to leave when I saw her jewelry on the dresser. I took that. Then I saw a typewritten manuscript. It was a story called 'Loose Spirit' by B. Bogado. I put that in my handbag, too, and hurried out of her place.

"I have been like someone else all week, hating the dead woman. Then this morning, when I took the check from the post office, I went home, threw myself on the bed and tried to cry. I felt like I had changed back to myself and I felt very bad about the dead woman. I'm sorry I killed her."

She began weeping.

Roe put in, "Why didn't you give yourself up to the police?"

"No! For my mother's sake. She didn't know! Do you think she would go to a movie if she knew?"

"One of those Jekyl-and-Hyde things," Roe muttered. "Why didn't you hock the jewelry?"

"Too hot," said Mary Trust, blowing her nose in a magenta handkerchief. "And I didn't cash the check because I felt too guilty."

"Why did you steal the story and try to get it published under a different name and title?"

"I don't know. I was crazy."

"You rented two post office boxes—when?"

"After I left the dead woman, I went to the post office and rented Box 123, and mailed the story. Next day I put on sun glasses and rented Box 133."

"How about a little screw?" said Roe.

"I beg your pardon!" The woman straightened up in her chair.

I said to the captain, "The screw, not a screw. You're forgetting your English, Roe."

"Oh," said Mary Trust. "You mean the—Well, I took it out with some machine oil and a short screwdriver before I collected the check."

"You mean the day before, of course."

She nodded. "Then I wiped off the oil. It took me two minutes. No one was watching."

"And the next day you entered the post office, opened Box 133, put your hand in, bent the top plate upward, reached into 123 and took out the check. Very ingenious. You thought of this yourself?"

"Oh, no," she said shyly. "I saw it in a movie, once. But what I want to know is what led you to me?"

Mary waited for an answer. We never gave it. She might have hated her mother if we told her the truth. And the truth was, after my mental block had lifted at the tavern, it all came back to me that the woman who had removed the check from Box 133 had resembled Mrs. Cecilia Trust very strongly.

And because of my strange, temporary blackout, and my belated solution of the crime, both Captain Roe and I are now visiting the same Russian psychiatrist for a possible answer to my most singular mental aberration.

The Eraser

No girl's your loved one, no man's your pal, when you're marked with the killer's brand.

by
GARY BRANDNER

MATT GASKELL looked up quickly from his hot beef sandwich and caught the stranger's pale eyes just before they flicked away.

For a moment Gaskell studied the man who was perched uncomfortably on the stool nearest the door. The soft, doughly face was unfamiliar. The man wore a new looking plaid shirt buttoned to the neck.

"Is your lunch all right, Matt?" the counterman asked.

"What? Oh, sure. It's fine."

"From the look on your face, I thought maybe something tasted funny."

The stranger's eyes crawled back to look at Matt Gaskell again. They lingered for a moment, and the fleshy lips twitched in the beginnings of a smile.

"It tastes just fine," Gaskell said. "I was thinking about something else."

The stranger rose from his stool, leaving a halfeaten hamburger, and walked out of the lunch room.

Matt Gaskell rubbed a thumb across his lean jaw and watched the stranger cross the street. He said, "Who is that guy?"

"He's a strange one," the counterman said. "He came in on the Greyhound from Milwaukee this morning. He was in here for breakfast, asking about how to get to Wausau. I told him if he'd stayed right on the bus he came on it would've taken him there. Then he said maybe he'd stick around here in Clinton for a couple of days. I sent him on over to the hotel for a room. Darned if I know what a city type character like that can find to do around here."

"Beats me," Gaskell said. "I guess I'd better get back to the office."

He left the lunch room and headed across Main Street toward the Majestic Hotel, a two-story brick building that had served travelers in Clinton for fifty years. He stopped outside the glassed entrance and looked in.

He saw the stranger standing in the doorway of the manager's office. Beyond him the tall, white-haired figure of the manager appeared to be listening while the stranger talked.

When he saw Matt Gaskell through the glass, the hotel man waved, and the faint scar tissue around his eyes crinkled in a smile. Gaskell grinned and saluted in return, then continued down the block to his office where a painted wooden sign read: MATTHEW GASKELL, INSURANCE & REAL ESTATE.

He told his young salesman to take off for lunch and sat the rest of the afternoon frowning out the window. Once he saw the stranger walk by on the other side of the street.

After dinner that night Gaskell stood on the porch of his white clapboard house with his hands clasped behind him. He stared out past the elm trees to the quiet street. He felt a light, familiar touch at his shoulder.

"Is anything troubling you, Matt?"

He turned and put his arms around the small, pretty woman who had asked the question. Tiny furrows of worry showed on her brow.

"No, Janet," he said, giving her a hug. "I just came out for some of this evening air. I believe our hot spell is over."

"Is everything all right at the office?"

."Sure. Isn't it always?"

"Speaking of the office," Janet said, "I thought I was going to line up some business for you today."

"Oh?"

"I was out with my flowers this afternoon when I saw this little man in a bright colored shirt out front looking for the name on our

mail box. I walked out and asked if I could help him. He said he just wanted to know if this was where Mr. Gaskell, the insurance agent, lived. I told him it was and asked if there was anything I could do for him. He just said, 'No thanks,' and walked off toward town. Do you know who it was?"

Gaskell's eyebrows drew together, and long-banked coals began to glow in his dark eyes. "No, Janet," he said, "I don't know the man."

"Well, I expect if he has business with you he'll come to the office."

"Yes, I suppose he will."

It was ten o'clock the next morning when the stranger came into the office. He wore the same plaid shirt and the same half-apologetic, half-insinuating smile.

The young salesman started up from his desk, but Matt Gaskell shook his head.

"I'll take care of this," he said. He walked to the counter and faced the stranger. "What can I do for you?"

"Nice little town you have here," the stranger said. "Off the beaten path, know what I mean, but nice." His voice was thin and without resonance, as though it came from his Adam's apple.

"Are you interested in real estate here?" Gaskell said evenly.

The stranger leaned forward until their faces were almost touching. He whispered, "I came for the eraser."

Gaskell's expression didn't change, but the coals smoldered

deep in his eyes. He said, "I don't think I understand you."

"I can spell it out for you if I have to." The stranger jerked his head at the young salesman, who was searching for something in the files. "Maybe we better go someplace where we can talk private."

Matt Gaskell stared hard at the other man for a count of five; then he turned to the salesman.

"I'll be back in a few minutes, Dave. Watch the store, will you?"

Gaskell walked out the door and down Second Street two blocks to where it ended on the bank of the Wolf River. He leaned against the wooden railing and waited for the stranger to catch up.

"All right. Who are you, and what do you want from me?"

"My name's Petey Trumbo. I guess you wouldn't remember me. I was just an eighteen year-old punk when you were the top hit man on

the Coast. Rudy Scalese was your name then. They called you 'The Eraser.' You were my idol, you know that? I wanted to be just like you."

"Are you sure you know what you're talking about?"

"Yeah, I'm sure. You've changed in twenty years, but your eyes are the same. I'll never forget those eyes. It was like looking through little windows of black glass at a furnace.

"Oh, I know you, all right. Remember when you hit Big Carlo? He was the top man in Frisco at the time. He was so high up in the organization that most of us little guys never even seen him. We knew he was in trouble, though. They'd already tried once to hit him with a whole carload of gunmen. They shot him up some, but they couldn't kill him.

"Next time, they put The Eraser on the job, and it was all over. They never found enough of Carlo to identify. Does that convince you I know what I'm talking about?"

"I'll ask you again, what do you want from me?" Gaskell said.

"I'm getting to that. I thought you might like to talk over old times first. Big Carlo was your last job, wasn't he? At least, he was the last that anybody knew about, because it was right after that you disappeared. That was good timing. Right after you dropped out of sight the F.B.I. and the San Francisco police moved in and took just about the whole gang. I did fifteen years myself at Folsom.

"Too bad. How about getting to the point? If you have blackmail in mind, you'd better know that I haven't much cash."

"I don't want any money, Rudy," Trumbo said through his weak smile. "I just want you to go back to work. Do one more job—for me."

Gaskell said nothing. The flame behind his eyes burned hotter.

"You see, I got myself in a little jam in Milwaukee with Gus Plank. Maybe you heard of him. No? Well, Gus runs the biggest book around here, outside of Chicago. He thinks I took some money that belonged to him.

"Gus is a bad man to have down on you. I was heading up north here, looking for a nice little town to hide in. I guess you know how that goes. But the only way for me to be really safe is for Gus Plank to be dead. Me—I'm no killer. I couldn't do the job myself. But now that I've found you, I think my troubles are over."

"I've been out of that business a long time, Petey."

"That doesn't matter. A talent like yours is something a man doesn't lose."

"Suppose I tell you to go to hell?"

"I don't think you'll do that. There's a lot of people who'd be pretty surprised to hear that good old Matt Gaskell used to be Rudy Scalese, The Eraser. By the way, I talked to your wife yesterday. She seems like a nice lady."

Gaskell took a step toward the other man, who glanced quickly at the slow moving river below them.

"Don't try it," Trumbo said. "You don't think I'd be here telling you all this if I didn't have insurance, do you? I'm not that dumb. Last night I sat down and wrote out everything I know about you. I put in as many names as I could remember of the men you killed, with the dates as near as I could recall.

"I addressed the letter to the F.B.I., and I put it where it's safe. If I don't pick it up personally the day after tomorrow, it gets delivered. I guess that would finish your little world here, wouldn't it."

"You could be bluffing."

"Not me. I never bluff. I gave the envelope to the manager of the hotel where I'm staying. I think you know the man. He put it in the hotel safe. If I'm not around to pick it up in two days, he'll hand it over to the feds."

A young couple, holding hands, strolled toward the river bank where the men stood. Lowering his voice, Gaskell said: "All right, I'll do the job. Now let's get out of here. We'll go into Milwaukee tonight."

"Tonight already?"

"Why wait? Be in front of my office at nine o'clock. I'll pick you up."

Trumbo rubbed his pudgy hands together. "This is what I like—dealing with a real professional."

That night the stars were hidden behind a solid cloud cover that promised rain in a day or two. The four-year-old Buick hummed south on Highway 41 toward Milwaukee. Matt Gaskell gripped the steering wheel and said nothing. The fire of his eyes was white-hot.

Beside him, Petey Trumbo chewed on his underlip and looked over now and then at Gaskell's expressionless face. The radio played recorded polka music, which neither man listened to.

Abruptly, Gaskell braked the heavy car and wheeled onto a side road.

"What's the matter?" Trumbo said. "Where are you going?" Then more urgently, "Come on, let's get back on the highway."

The car sped down the ever-narrowing road. Its headlights washed across trees and tangled brush on both sides. Matt Gaskell hit the brakes, and the Buick slammed to a stop.

"Get out," Gaskell said.

"Are you crazy?" Listen, you can't hurt me. Don't forget that letter back in the hotel."

"Get out," Gaskell said again. This time there was a short-barreled .38 in his hand. He put the muzzle between Trumbo's ear lobe and his jawbone. Trumbo got out of the car.

"Look, Rudy—I mean Matt—I'm willing to call the whole thing off. Take me back to Clinton. I'll get my letter. I'll tear it up, and we can forget the whole thing. Okay?"

As Trumbo talked, Gaskell slide

out of the car behind him and marched him to the edge of the thick underbrush.

"Honest, I promise you you'll never see me again," Trumbo said. "I give you my word."

Matt Gaskell pulled the trigger. The impact of the slug knocked Trumbo back into the bushes. He was dead when Gaskell picked up his feet and swung them out of sight.

In his office at the Majestic Hotel the white-haired manager passed a thick envelope across the desk to Matt Gaskell.

"Here it is," he said. "Do you want to read it?"

"Not very much."

"I did. Trumbo had a good memory."

"Better than his judgement. He's the third, now, who has recognized me."

"But the only one in the past eight years. Maybe he'll be the last."

"I hope so. Sometimes I still think I should have had plastic surgery like you."

The white-haired man smiled. "That wasn't exactly by choice, you remember. Bullets can make a real mess of a man's face."

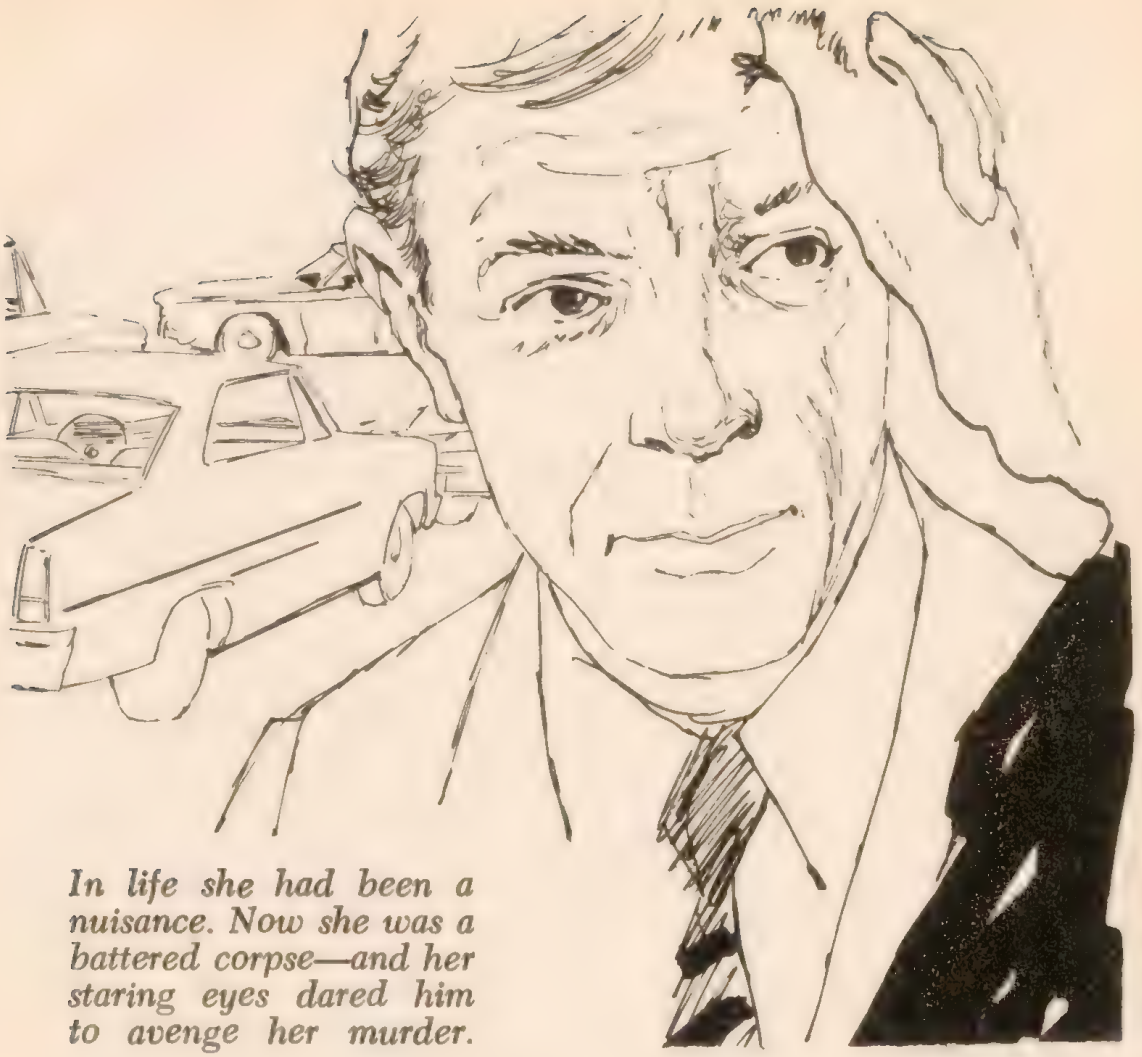
"Yes, they can. I'll see you around—Carlo."

ATTENTION—ALL WESTERN FANS

Meet Mike Shayne's Companion in Adventure!

ZANE GREY WESTERN MAGAZINE

Whenever Western story buffs meet, wherever the Longhorn trails are ridden in fiction by men who really know, Zane Grey's name will come up, as one of the greatest of all Western writers of the kind of tales which will always live. One of the earliest, and one of the all-time greats, Zane Grey has for decades maintained his deserved standing at the top of all authors of the old West. "Riders of the Purple Sage" and the rest of his great tales will live as long as a diehard reader chooses to dream about the West which was — and is no more. *And now, at long last, here is a magazine which has targeted every page to the memory and perpetuation of the glory which was Zane Grey's.* In ZANE GREY WESTERN MAGAZINE you will find, exclusively, and for the first time, authentic sequels to the tales he made immortal — written by Romer Zane Grey, who grew up as the originals were being written. Don't miss this once-in-a-lifetime treat in Western reading enjoyment. Buy *Zane Grey Western Magazine* today at your dealer's!



In life she had been a nuisance. Now she was a battered corpse—and her staring eyes dared him to avenge her murder.

Barrels Of Clues

by CARL HENRY RATHJEN

I'D NEVER KILLED anyone before, so I was scared that Friday afternoon when I went into the one-room police headquarters of Valley View, population 2534. The only consoling thought was that if I were going to be arrested for murder I wouldn't have been allowed to finish work, wash up and come in without benefit of escort.

McCabe, the gray-eyed chief of the three-man department, offered

me coffee, which I refused. Then he motioned me to a chair beside his desk.

"All right, Pete. Let's have the whole story."

"Am I in trouble?" I asked.

"Any citizen who takes the law into his own hands," he began gravely — then shook his head. "Maybe you were lucky, maybe not. I'll know better after you tell me. Suppose you start with the discovery of the murder."

"It starts before that," I muttered.

McCabe's gray eyes pinned me. "Then you had something which you didn't tell me about? Why?"

"I didn't know what I had, Mac," I protested. "But after thinking it over—can I tell it my way?"

"Go ahead," he sighed.

"Well," I explained, "it's just that you don't start collecting clues until after something has happened. But as for me, well, I don't snoop or anything like that. But I can't help noticing and learning things about people twice a week all year 'round when I empty their trash barrels."

McCabe smiled slightly. "Pardon the pun, Pete, but it's a stinking way to get information."

He didn't wrinkle his nose the way most people do when they find out I'm the garbage man. It used to bother me and I'd go into long explanations of how it came about, that I'd inherited the Plato Sanitation Company from an uncle and so, seeing a chance to go into a paying business and get married sooner, I gave up college.

Now I'm a trustee on the school board and have a daughter who's made me feel proud of my work. She majored in psychology and in her thesis compared me with archeologists who go into dithers when they find some old civilization's trash heap. She called me a "current archeologist" because, as I explained to Mac, people reveal a lot about themselves in the things they discard.

For instance, I knew before anyone else that a big wedding was being called off when I spotted the bridegroom-to-be's torn photo in the girl's family barrel. I also knew which supposedly staid pillar of the community was a secret boozer, though you'd never learn it from his barrels. I once caught him stashing his bottle in neighbors' barrels up and down the alley.

"And," I told McCabe, "before I met the head of the new family on West Eighth Street I knew from his trash that he was a writer."

McCabe grinned. "So you've got barrels of clues about people." His grin vanished. "But when it was important, you never let on—"

"Mac," I interrupted hastily, "it's just that I wasn't sure, and anyway I regard such knowledge as being confidential, the same as a doctor or lawyer does."

McCabe stared with a very set expression.

"A code of ethics," he murmured. "You!"

I nodded. "If I spot something telltale I don't even call it to the attention of Homer, my helper. I just cover it quickly with some more garbage or trip the lever that brings down the steel ram to compact the load out of sight back in the truck."

"All right," McCabe sighed. "Get on with it."

So I told him how it was on Tuesday afternoon when we swung into the alley on the southwest side of town.

It was one of those broiling June days. The only things working were the bees on the rambler roses and me and Homer, rambling from barrel to barrel which, in that weather, weren't exactly like roses.

We were looking forward to reaching Amy Stokes's place halfway down the alley. On days like that the kindly old soul usually met us at her back gate with a plate of chocolate chip cookies and tall glasses of cool lemonade or chilled bottles of pop. In winter she'd invite us to her warm service porch for steaming coffee or hot chocolate.

Of course, to be honest about it, her motives weren't simon pure kindliness. In her sweet way she'd try to ferret out from us, from the postman, deliveryman, anyone, whatever gossip or rumors we might have picked up. But no one is perfect, and I always looked forward to the pick-up at her place, aside from the intellectual stimulation of trying to find out what she knew without telling what I knew.

"But on Tuesday when we swung into the alley we saw a police car back of Amy's," I said. "It was Tom Knapperman, one of your regulars, McCabe. He came on the double when he saw us."

"Hold it, Pete," Knapperman called. "Don't empty anything here."

Homer shuffled forward from the tailstep. I didn't see him in the big outside mirror. I heard him coming even above the rumble of the rig's motor, because in his left breast pocket he always carries a transistor radio turned up to full volume. All day long. It just about drives me nuts, all that tinny din aside from the noise of the barrels.

"What's up?" Homer demanded. "You want to give the maggots a field day?"

Knapperman, whose khaki shirt was darkly splotched with sweat, looked from Homer to me. "Have you guys spotted a gun in any of the barrels you've emptied?"

"Only an armored car," I said.

"Too broken," Homer added "Not worth trying to fix for my kids."

Knapperman looked annoyed, raising his voice above Homer's radio.

"Skip this alley and keep your eyes open for a weapon."

"Did somebody lose it or get shot with it?" I asked.

He jolted me when he said, "Amy Stokes. The medical examiner fig-

ures she was killed sometime last night. The house has been ransacked. A neighbor discovered it when Amy's garden water overflowed the yard."

I stared unbelievingly. And Homer did a surprising thing. He pulled off a glove and shut off the radio. His lips moved. My mouth felt full of cotton too, but there wouldn't be any refreshing drink here today. Never again.

Sure, she had her faults. Some called her a nosey old bitch, but she sometimes put it to good use too. Like when my daughter was a teenager and began secretly meeting a wrong crowd. Amy got onto it and contrived to see my kid, without my knowledge at the time, and set her straight.

That's why I never got sore at Amy when she tried to learn things from me about other people. Now I felt sick, mad, all mixed up like the stuff in the barrels.

Homer growled, working his big hands in the gloves and flexing his long arms. "This alley ain't going to be the same again."

I nodded, and looked at Knapperman. "You and Mac got any leads?"

"We've just got started," he said, then gestured down the alley. "Leave those barrels. You can come back and empty them later."

"We'll do it now," I snapped. I wasn't thinking that we were just about finished with our route southwest in town and that we'd have to come way back here later. I wanted to help do something about Amy's killer.

"Look," I explained quickly and more calmly to Knapperman, "we last emptied those cans on Friday, so anything stashed in them in a hurry is going to be near the top of the heap, since it was done last night, Monday. So let me and Homer give a hand looking."

"It'll be neater too," Homer declared. "You won't be leaving stuff all over the ground for us to pick up later."

"That's a good idea, Pete," said McCabe, coming out the back gate a few doors away from Amy's. I guessed he'd been questioning her neighbors. If he'd learned anything it didn't show on his face.

Homer turned on the damn radio again and the four of us, accompanied by curious neighbors, got to work down the alley. Rather, Homer and I worked, dumping the top thirds of barrels into the rig. Then we pawed through bottles, cans, paper, fish and meat bones, all the mess, spreading it thin, emptying the rest of a barrel and then tripping the lever to bring down the steel-toothed ram to shove the stuff back in the rig before moving on to the next set-out.

Some of the morbidly curious made jokes about it, saying we ought to take it all to city hall and put people to work there for a change. Others weren't quite so en-

thusiastic about possible secrets we were exposing.

Swede Bjornstad, who repaired lawn mowers in the garage across the alley from Amy's, glared at his prim-mouthed wife when we tumbled out a glass jug of dancing cherry wine.

"So it wasn't stolen from my workshop! You threw it out!"

His wife bounced the glare to McCabe and me. Swede, trying to retrieve the jug, banged and broke it against the lip of the rig.

Across the alley, next door to Amy's, only McCabe and I kept looking for a gun when young Mrs. Lowell, a redhaired widow, stood by in a yellow bikini. Homer dumped her barrel. His gloved hand lifted a torn, black lacy bra. She spread fingers over her eyes.

"Let the lady have her secrets," I muttered and tilted out the rest of her barrel.

Homer's hand pounced on a brown bottle. We keep a box on the tailstep for pop and beer bottles worth a deposit. As I put the lid on the barrel I heard Mrs. Lowell speaking apologetically to McCabe.

"I'm sorry I couldn't be of more help about hearing that shot last night, but with windows closed because of air-conditioning and with the TV on—"

She went through her yard to the house, stepping daintily through the mud caused by the overflow of water that had come from Amy's garden.

"Is she the one who discovered Amy?" I asked McCabe.

He shook his head. "Mrs. Bjornstad did. Let's get on with this job."

"Move the truck, Homer," I called, then walked with McCabe toward the next set-out. "Knapperman said the house was ransacked. Amy didn't have anything worth taking. She barely made ends meet." McCabe didn't answer.

I tried again. "It must have happened early last night when she had her hose set out to irrigate the garden. She once told me that, living alone, she never came out and always kept the doors locked after dark. It got dark last night about a quarter to ten, so—"

McCabe nodded. "That jibes with the medical examiner's time of death." Mac looked at me. "Maybe you're in the wrong business, Pete Plato. Got any more good thinking to relay?"

"Not at the moment," I muttered.

Maybe we both made a mistake

right there. I should have told him what I was trying to grope for through the cotton that was in my brain as well as my mouth. Maybe if he'd questioned me a little more, but then again Monday morning quarterbacks can always make a perfect score.

At the end of the alley we hadn't found a gun. McCabe thanked us for the help, and Homer and I went on collecting. When the rig was compacted full we headed for the county landfill dump, five miles from Valley View. On the way I nearly clipped a car because my mind wasn't on my driving.

I blamed it on the distraction of Homer's radio blasting from his breast pocket. He didn't take the hint. Returning from the dump I let him drive. At least that put the radio on the far side from me. He shouted above the din of it and roar of the rig's motor.

"We're sure gonna miss Amy and her handouts. My mouth's like a desert."

I nodded, but didn't speak until we were entering Valley View. "Swing by city hall. We can hit the pop machine there."

I also wanted to see McCabe, but the chief of a three-man police department is always a man on the go because he lacks manpower and specialized squads. Mrs. Bailey at the switchboard said he and Knapperman were busy cleaning up a traffic accident.

She had no idea if any progress had been made on the Amy Stokes case before it had to be temporarily shelved. I drank my root beer slowly, then told Homer I'd pay him time and a half to finish the route alone and make another trip to the dump.

After cleaning my face and hands in the city hall washroom, I looked in the police room, but no one was there. So I walked up to Main Street. A half block east I entered the state liquor dispensary and looked over the whisky display.

"What'll it be, Pete?" asked the clerk.

"Saskatch Bourbon," I said. "It has a label shaped like a heraldic crest."

"Saskatch?" he repeated, puzzled. "Never heard of it. And as far as I can recall, it's not listed in the catalogs."

"That's what I thought," I said. "Just wanted to be sure."

I left him gaping, went home, showered and put on clean clothes. Getting in my car, I drove to the southside, up on the hill where some of the upper crust looks down on the rest of Valley View.

I stopped by a mailbox built of granite bricks. A black metal sign with gilt lettering read *The Roscoes*. Precisely banked peonies and rhododendron outlined the lawn to the imposing house built of granite with broad windows overlooking the valley, carpeted by treetops with roofs speckling through.

My push on the door button pro-

duced a rising and falling tinkle of chimes. I waited, then touched the button again. No one home.

Back in my car I drove up the street, turned right on Hillcrest, then swung into the paved lane—it wasn't called an alley up there. A woman in a broadbrimmed straw hat and holding a trowel rose to look at me over a fence covered with clematis.

I drove on past the Roscoes' two-story garage and guest house, parked, and quietly closed the car door. Walking back I silently removed lids from barrels behind neighboring houses. The Rolls, which is supposed to be noisy only in its dashboard clock, nearly caught me by surprise.

Robert Harrington Roscoe — it used to be Roscoe, III—regarded me with his cool banker's eye from beneath the brim of a Panama as he stopped the Rolls.

"Have you changed your collection day, Plato?" The voice was mild but the eyes were sharp. I knew he couldn't have missed the way I was dressed and the absence of my truck. The cotton in my brain didn't get in the way of my answer.

"No, it's still Wednesday and Saturday," I replied. "But my rig needs some work, and I was trying to judge whether I could make a short quick collection tomorrow to get it in the shop." I smiled. "But, since we've met, I've also been thinking of a loan to get a new rig."

Roscoe just stared at me a moment.

"Very well," he said, "but I don't discuss business at home."

"I know. Sorry," I agreed quickly, "but I'm hardly dressed during the day to—"

"If you make time to put the rig in the shop, you can make time to discuss important business." Those eyes held me hooked again.

"Of course," I murmured. "Been hunting in Canada lately?"

The coolness in the eyes dropped about one hundred degrees.

"See me at the office when you're ready," he said curtly. The Rolls glided silently away.

I didn't try to see McCabe that evening because I hadn't found any Saskatch bottles in the barrels of Roscoe's neighbors. Either he'd given up secret boozing since I'd once caught him distributing his bottles, or he was tossing them out on the road and dumping them somewhere out of town.

But then again he'd caught my inference when I'd asked about Canada. He got his secret private stock from a small distillery up in Saskatchewan. I'd seen the name on a torn carton among his trash.

That evening I drove to the front of Amy Stokes's place, rang the bell and when I didn't get an answer I went next door to young Mrs. Lowell's. Instead of the bikini she wore pink stretch pants and a blouse that didn't leave much to the imagination.

"Sorry to disturb you," I answered the question in her eyes, "but I've been wondering if there's anything I could do to help Mrs. Stokes's relatives. I believe she had a sister and a brother somewhere, and a married son. But they don't seem to be here yet."

"I wouldn't know," she said. "I didn't get very well acquainted with her."

I nodded. "You've been here only a short time. You came from Canada, didn't you?"

"Kansas," she corrected me promptly. "What on earth made you think I was from Canada?"

I shrugged. "Guess I heard wrong."

The warm light in her eyes congealed. "I guess you've heard a lot of wrong things about me in this town." Her glance went briefly toward Amy Stokes's next door.

"No, ma'am," I said. "Sorry I bothered you."

I drove away, turned left at the corner, circled around a few blocks and stopped in front of the Bjornstads. Bypassing the house, I went back to Swede's shop on the alley. He was pulling the flywheel of a lawnmower motor to get at the points.

"Sorry about that jug of wine this afternoon," I said.

Swede grunted. "Wasn't your doing, and maybe it was for the best. She won't try anything like that again—maybe."

I grinned, glancing at his neat array of tools and clean workbench. "I thought you took better care of things. How did she happen to spot it?"

"Caught me off balance last Saturday night. Thought she was watching TV, but she came tiptoeing out here. Not to spy on me. She knows I won't stand for that. But she wanted to look out my window."

He nodded toward a wide expanse that gave him good light on his bench and a view of the fences across the alley.

"Who was she spying on?" I inquired. "Amy or Mrs. Lowell?"

"What do you think?" he retorted, removing the cover from the points and condensor.

"Anything interesting to see?" I asked.

"Did she send you out here to ask me?" he demanded.

"I'm asking on my own and as a friend of Amy's."

"Friend of Amy's," he muttered, snapping out the points. "That's 'cause you didn't have to live across the way from her and having her poke into your business all the time."

"Did she poke much at you?" I prompted.

"In her sweet hinting way about my jugs or a little poker session here now and then. Blackmail would be a better word for it. Anyway, that's how she got her lawn mower serviced and the fence repaired for nothing. Guess that's how she got most everything done around her

place. She ever pull that on you?"

"I knew too much she wanted to know," I said.

Swede Bjornstad looked up at me. "But now there's something you don't know. That's what you're trying to find out from me, ain't it?"

I took my time replying. "I'm not trying to whitewash Amy, but I do feel indebted for a favor she did for me once. I always repay favors. I can always keep my eye open for thrown-out jugs of cherry wine or purchased ones now and then."

He tossed the burned points in a trash box. His blunt fingers clawed open a cardboard container of new ones.

"I'm waiting to be asked," he murmured, glancing toward his house. "Just don't you tell her. One Amy in this town was enough."

"Who's been visiting the young widow?" I asked.

Swede glanced toward the big window on the alley. "After she'd been in there a couple of weeks I figured the city ought to put a traffic light out there. I never said anything though. Just figured some of 'em made a non-marriage like I did in my younger days. Then the past couple months it's been like a cloister out there. So I figured she'd latched on to somebody big and locked the gate on the others."

I smiled. "I think I'm beginning to smell cherry wine. Who is it?"

Swede looked sad. "I've never spotted him, and I didn't try too

hard either, because like I said, maybe his marriage—"

"Didn't you ever see his car?"

"Nope. He must have slipped in on foot, left his car parked somewhere else."

I nodded slowly, staring out the window. "Probably after dark. But if he's the one who did in Amy because of her sweet blackmail, he got here before dark last night."

"I wasn't home, had to take the bag of bones to visit some relatives." Swede looked sadder. "I guess that takes care of the cherry wine."

"Not the way you think," I said. "Maybe I'll make delivery Friday morning. Meanwhile, you try to remember anything you might not have paid too much attention to at the time."

Mrs. Lowell's place was dark, so I went home. Early in the morning

Homer and I collected up in the Roscoe neighborhood. I closely watched the contents of barrels, but no Saskatch bottles appeared. In Roscoe's containers I spotted some old gun collector's catalogs. When Homer and I broke for lunch I drove to city hall.

In the police room Knapperman was typing up a traffic citation with hunt and peck system and sweat.

"You ought to get air-conditioning here," I said.

"We'll need it if you drop in often," he remarked. "What can I do for you?"

"Where's Mac?"

"In court in Allentown."

I frowned. "Does that mean the Stokes case is still on the shelf?"

Knapperman looked up. "No case is ever on the shelf around here."

"Then how are you coming on it?"

"We're coming."

I waited for more information. When it didn't come, I asked, "Did you find the gun?"

"We got the bullet from autopsy and the Allentown lab told us the kind of gun it probably came from."

Again I waited. "What kind?"

"Mac didn't show me the report," said Knapperman, looking for a key on the typewriter. He stabbed the wrong one and swore. I got out before he began swearing at me.

That evening I stopped by McCabe's home. He was a widower with three children. His baby sitter answered the door. She said she was there because Mac expected to be out on a case until after dark. Neither she nor his junior high daughter knew what case.

I drove to Mrs. Lowell's.

"No light next door yet," I said, nodding toward Amy Stokes's.

"No, there isn't," she said, staring at me. This time she wore a yellow blouse and shorts.

"Sooner or later Amy's folks will be here," I remarked. "But by the way, I'm puzzled about you being from Kansas, not Canada. Maybe you visit up there or you've got relatives or something?"

"Or something why?" she demanded.

"Well," I explained, "I can't help noticing when I empty your trash barrels. For some months now I've seen some Saskatch bottles. In fact, there was one last Tuesday. I happen to know that's made and distributed only in Canada.

I thought I was going to be clawed.

"Mr. Plato," she snapped, "I don't happen to know how they got in my barrel. But I do happen to know now that Amy Stokes has no sister, no brother, no married son. No relatives. So suppose you stop snooping around and mind your own stinking business."

The slam of the door put a period to that.

I stopped by Mac's early Thursday morning only to learn that the Allentown court case had been con-

tinued from the previous day and he had left already.

Homer drove me batty with his radio that day. A couple of times I thought I saw a Rolls in the vicinity of our rounds, but it was another stifling day and shimmering heat waves made vision blurry.

Late in the day I stopped by the P.D. again. Knapperman was just going off-duty and Donovan was taking over the night shift.

"Where's Mac?" I asked.

"He's on a stake-out, cooperating with the state police."

"Look," I said to Knapperman. "Then I've got to tell you."

"Tell me what? Make it fast," he said, looking at the clock. "I've got just forty-five minutes to wash up and drive thirty miles to be best man at a wedding."

"You going to give yourself a citation for breaking speed laws?" I asked.

I saw his impatience, so I talked fast about the Amy Stokes case. His impatience converted to intentness.

"I can't tell you what Mac and I have been working on," he began.

"I've already become aware of that," I remarked dryly.

"That's one hell of police work," he said. "We need citizen cooperation, which you've been providing, but for good reasons we can't tell everything we know."

He managed to give me a smile despite another look at the clock. "Now who's this man you've probably tabbed as a secret boozer, has been visiting Mrs. Lowell regularly, is a gun collector and whom you think used one of his guns to kill Amy Stokes because of a possible blackmail attempt?"

"The only thing you left out were some whereases and wherefores," I said. "Maybe you should have been a lawyer instead of a cop."

"Give me the name," he said patiently.

"Robert Harrington Roscoe."

Knapperman stared. Donovan stared. I stared at them. Finally I got tired of waiting.

"Well?"

"Jeez!" Knapperman gasped. "The town's big shot!" He closed his eyes and shook his head. "I'm not going to move on that one on my own. That's got to be Mac's baby if there's anything to it."

"I'm pretty sure there is," I insisted. "How does that jibe with what you and Mac have found out?"

"I don't know everything Mac's uncovered, and I wouldn't tell you if I did." Knapperman turned to Donovan. "You heard Pete. Will you relay it to Mac when you get a chance?"

"Why wait?" I demanded. "Roscoe might be planning to leave town."

"And leave everything behind? Don't be nuts. And I think this whole idea is nuts. You'd better keep your mouth closed about it, Pete, until Mac hears it and decides what to do."

So I went home to bed, but didn't sleep. It still made sense to me. And I was sure Mrs. Lowell knew what Roscoe had done to Amy Stokes. He must have waited at her place until he saw the way was clear to slip next door to Amy's. And why, when her yard was flooded the next morning, did she wait until afternoon for someone else to discover it?

In the morning, Friday, I intended to get in touch with McCabe the first thing to get his yes or no opinion. But as I was picking up the phone to call him the town fire sirens began shrilling. I re-cradled the phone because I knew he'd accompany the volunteers to keep sightseers and traffic out of their way.

Homer and his transistor and I started our Friday route. I changed it though to hit the southwest side in the morning instead of the afternoon. I had a jug for Swede Bjornstad.

"Keep your eyes open across the way," I muttered. "You see anything you phone city hall and get Mac here. He'll know what it's all about if he got my message. Do me a favor and phone anyway to make sure he got it."

Homer transistored across the alley, carrying Mrs. Lowell's barrel with one hand as though it were a kid's beach pail.

"Empty it easy," I snapped.

I pawed through the contents and then, in frustration, yanked the lever to bring down the toothed ram. Maybe Knapperman was right. Maybe as a detective I ought to stick to my stinking job!

So I went on collecting and enduring Homer's radio, and his grumbling about how we were going to miss Amy Stokes. We got a couple blocks away where we had some carry-outs, which meant that Homer took our huge barrel into backyards and emptied three or four barrels into it and carried it back to the truck on his shoulder.

I took care of the set-outs on the curb. In the dim tunnel made by elms over the street I picked up a barrel in each hand and toted them around the rear of the truck—and there was the silent Rolls and Roscoe waiting with a cold silent look.

No words nor explanations were needed.

From inside his jacket he drew a silenced handgun. I dropped one can, swung the other up for a shield. The tightly packed barrel stopped the slug. Roscoe aimed for my face, peering over the barrel's rim. I ducked, knowing it was only a moment before he'd close in for a clear shot. Scrambling toward the side of the truck I heard Homer shout.

I glanced back as he heaved our heavy barrel from his shoulder. Roscoe jumped aside. Before he could regain balance Homer's huge hand clamped on his wrist and swung the gun upward. But Homer didn't stop with that. He dangled Roscoe and flipped him into the

rig. The banker fired from his sprawled position in the truck. Homer staggered back, gasping, and started to buckle.

It was now up to me. I had time to do only one thing. Jumping up, I yanked the lever. The rig's engine roared. The ram started down. I fully intended to stop it, to bring it down just enough to scare Roscoe's attention from us. But I slipped on some garbage spilled from the barrel I'd dropped. Before I could recover to stop the ram, Robert Harrington Roscoe, III, had been crushed and compacted to one-third his living size.

Homer panted to his feet and pulled out his smashed transistor which had stopped the bullet. I was gabbling that I'd buy him another one for saving my life when McCabe's station wagon skidded to a stop.

McCabe just said that Swede Bjornstad had phoned him after spotting Roscoe leave Mrs. Lowell's on my trail. But since I'd changed my normal route Mac had been delayed in finding me.

After that I was dazed and worried for the next hour. We had to wait for the medical examiner before Roscoe could be mopped out of the truck. McCabe was busy getting statements. We were beseiged by sightseers, the press, a TV mobile unit. And city officials. Stunned civic leaders, and appalled bank officials who had a wild idea that this could be all hushed up.

McCabe finally spoke to me again. "We can't leave garbage sitting around in this hot weather, Pete. Finish your route and don't talk to anyone about this. I'm counting on your word of honor you'll come in and see me later."

"I'll be in this afternoon," I promised.

But I was scared when I went in that afternoon.

"So that's it," I finished telling him all about it. "Am I clean or do I have to get a lawyer to plead self-defense?"

"You're clean now, Pete. Pardon the pun again."

I relaxed when McCabe laughed. "Were you on the same track about Roscoe?" I asked.

"Not exactly at first. Some time back I'd been about to run Mrs. Lowell out of town for her activities, but then she took up with Roscoe. I knew I'd better move slow, be sure of my ground. He could throw a lot of obstacles in my way from his supposed pillar of respectability. Mrs. Lowell, by the way, is being held as a material witness and may possibly be charged as an accessory in the Amy Stokes matter."

"Then," I suggested, "since you were already watching Roscoe, I guess I sort of jumped the gun on you. I needn't have done it."

"Well, maybe it worked out better your way." McCabe smiled and held out his hand. "Thanks, Pete, for putting the lid on a very stinking case."

THE FIXER

Death wore two faces that strange night
—one of them just happened to be his.

by BILL WALLACE

CHARLIE PIXLER leaned back in his over-stuffed armchair and closed his eyes, enjoying the first moment of relaxation since he left for the shop at seven this morning.

The big recliner squeaked its shrill complaint as he pushed back to the second position. Charlie nestled farther down into the soft chair. Sure was nice to be home, he thought. Put in a hard days work, then come back to the peace and quiet of my own living room.

He reached to the table beside him, took his favorite pipe from the circular rack and stuffed it with tobacco. Seeping through the window, the cold winter wind flipped

the curtains. Charlie watched as the pipe smoke swirled in white strands toward the kitchen.

It was an old house but it was clean. The little woman saw to that. There were cracks in the ceiling and bare spots where the plaster had fallen. By the door to the kitchen was a light socket hanging loose by its cord.

The wife wanted the old place fixed up, but Charlie just didn't have the heart to deprive this old chair of his presence. It was easy to just sit there, and he knew if he waited long enough, she would do most of the work herself.

Suddenly the kitchen door squeaked open. Charlie glanced up and saw Martha standing in the doorway. He frowned.

She was a tiny woman, about five feet tall, with delicate hands, and a body that belied the fact that she was a grandmother five times. Below her small mouth, her firm little chin protruded like the bottom jaw of a pit bulldog.

She stood there, silent for a moment, squinting her eyes in a cold stare and stomping her foot.

"I thought I told you not to smoke in this room," she snapped. "You'll get ashes on the carpet."

Reluctantly, Charlie leaned up in his chair and got to his feet. He shrugged and slipped the pipe behind his back.

"I'm sorry, dear," he apologized. "I was to tired when I got home from work, I just forgot." He waited for a second, hoping for a sign of understanding. There was none. He shrugged again as a sign of innocence, then started for the door.

"I'll go outside, dear, and sit on the porch for a while."

Yes, and freeze to death, he added behind clinched teeth. But what the heck does she care?

Martha followed, almost on his heels.

"When are you going to fix that screen on the bathroom window? Somebody could get in some night with that big hole in the thing." She paused a second, as if trying to remember something. "Oh, yes, that cord to my electric heater needs fixed too."

Charlie shook his head.

"In just a few minutes," he replied. "Let me smoke my pipe for a little bit."

The little woman was still breathing down his neck when he came back from fixing the tiny hole in the screen.

"I wish you would fix that faucet in the bathtub," she said. "Every time I take a bath, it keeps dripping cold water into the tub."

Charlie stopped abruptly at the edge of his armchair and wheeled around to face her. Fist clenched at his side, he stood there trembling for an instant. He gritted his teeth, then caught himself and smiled.

"Yes, dear. I'll fix it right now, dear."

He got his tool box, then closed the bathroom door behind him.

Seething in silent anger, he yanked open the box and took out his 18 inch pipe wrench. He sat on the edge of the tub, smashing the wrench into the palm of his left hand.

For thirty-seven years now he had been trying to keep tranquility in his home. He had pampered her and done almost everything she had commanded. But it was no use. Every time he had done something nice for her, she had rewarded him with the kind of affection he could have gotten from an angry bear.

Charlie had often wondered how someone that tiny could have so much control over him, especially a woman. Maybe he just hadn't done the right things when they were first married. Maybe if he had knocked her cross-eyed the very first time she had tried to boss him around; just maybe he wouldn't have any problem with her now.

Charlie looked down at his hand. It was red from the pounding of the wrench. He sighed, then swung his leg over the tub and started to work in the faucet.

He just finished when Martha walked in. Her hair was rolled tight on curlers and cold cream was smeared all over her face.

"I hope you're finished," she said. "I want to take my bath now."

Charlie nodded and reached for the faucet. He turned it on then off. demonstrating how well he had repaired it.

Looking unconcerned, she turned to get her towel, then reached to turn on the water.

"It's just fine," she replied.

Charlie stood there, mouth open, wondering what to do next. Then he shrugged and put the wrench back into the tool box. Something metal rattled behind him as he started for the door.

"Oh, Charlie, I almost forgot," Martha said stepping into the water.

Turning toward her, Charlie followed her pointing finger to the small electric heater on the back of the tub.

"There's some bare wire near the plug-in. Why don't you put some tape around it or something? Every time I plug in my heater, I get the feeling I'm going to get electrocuted on the stupid thing."

Charlie smiled. Now there's an idea, he thought. He laced his fingers together and popped his knuckles, then walked over and picked up the heater.

He turned a small switch on the side. A red glow showed from the front of it as the bare coils started to heat. Charlie looked at the cord, then at Martha sitting in the tub. He took a deep breath and stared at her. She's always after me to fix things around here. I just might do it.

Martha was watching him, her eyes growing wider and wider.

"Charlie, I don't know why you're looking like that, but put that thing down this instant and go get that tape."

Charlie smiled and just stood there.

"Do you hear me?" she demanded. "I want you to fix it right now."

Charlie nodded.

"I'll fix it. I'll fix something I should have fixed years ago."

He took a deep breath and dropped the electric heater into the water. There was a splash and a very short scream.

Charlie raised his eyebrows and peered over the edge of the tub: Martha was under water, lying there quite peacefully.

He wrinkled his nose, feeling a twinge of remorse, then turned and walked from the room.

Charlie Pixler leaned back in his over-stuffed armchair, enjoying the first moment of peace and quiet in well over forty-two years. He took a deep breath and closed his eyes.

From the circular rack on the table beside him, he took his favorite pipe and lit it. It felt good to be lazy. No one around saying do this and do that. No one telling him what to fix and trying to make him do it right now.

Glancing up from his pipe, Charlie looked at the wall clock over the broken stove. It was only ten o'clock. I just might go down to the bar and have a couple of drinks with the boys, he thought.

The humming from the other room was louder, now. Charlie got up from the chair and walked past the light socket that hung by its cord near the kitchen door. Better go unplug Martha, he thought. I imagine she's done by now.

By the time he reached the door, Charlie had figured out what he would tell the police.

"Well, I came home after work and ate supper," he would begin. "Then about ten, I told Martha I was going down and have a couple of drinks with the boys." That would account for the time when he left work until he got down to the bar. "When I got home, I found her there." He might even try to work up a few tears.

He walked into the bathroom, glanced quickly at the tub, then reached for the cord. "I'm sorry, Martha, but you shouldn't have nagged me all the time."

Water had splashed on the floor. Bare wire met his grasp with a biting pain.

The pain surged through his body, making him shake and tremble all over. He tried to shake loose, but it was no use. The naked wires held him tight.

Opening his mouth, Charlie tried to scream. But the sound that crept from his lips sounded more like a short hiccup.

Maybe the old girl was right, he thought. Maybe I should have fixed a few things around here. Looks like I fixed one thing. Me.

His body trembled and vibrated out of control. Charlie tried to catch his breath but he couldn't. The room started spinning, and a heavy blackness threw him to the floor.

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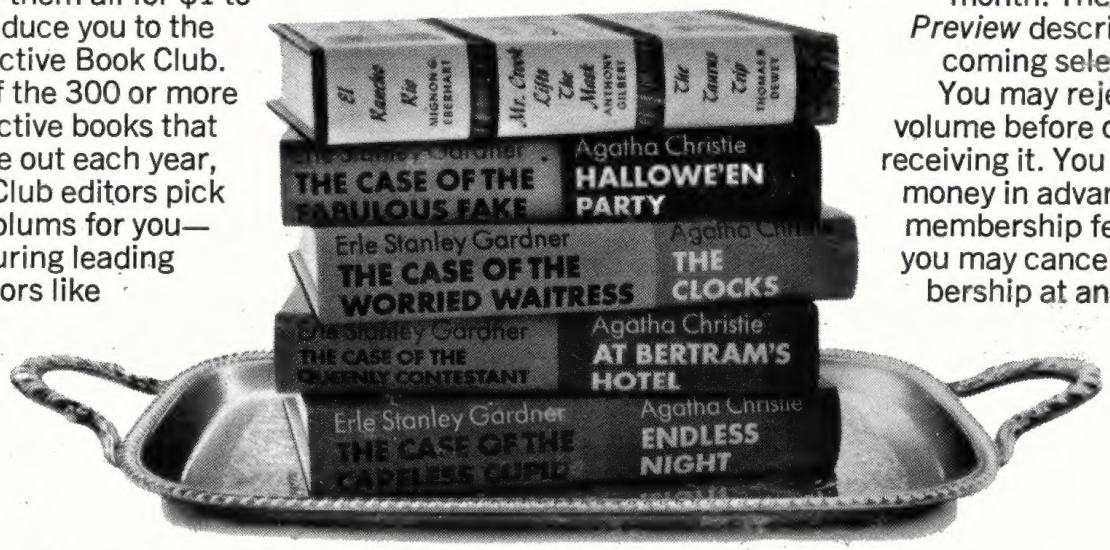

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